

Sketch

Evading hurdles on a high horse



Simon Hoggart

IT WOULD be quite wrong to say that Tony Blair turned up in the Commons yesterday in a waxed jacket and moleskin plus fours, as a cloud of midges buzzed around his head, but there was an undeniably rustic tone to some of his answers.

Normally in the Commons you can just hear the bullsh*t; yesterday you could almost smell it as well.

Anne McGuire (Lab, Stirling) described the pitiful state of the countryside after 18 years of Tory misrule: the decrease in people's incomes, the massive increase in homelessness and so on.

Mr Blair had no problem with that. He leapt on to his high horse and galloped off in hot pursuit of the Tories and their little, bushy-tailed leader. "Four hundred and fifty rural schools closed! Crime up! Poverty up!"

"And," He paused for effect. "They gave the country BSE!" The Tories gasped in horrified pleasure. (Anyone who has attended one of these events knows that they really enjoy the hunt.) "Let me repeat it again," said Mr Blair. "They gave the country BSE!"

This is perfectly true, which is why the Conservatives reacted so angrily. (It would be tempting to say that they all went "ooh arr, ooh arr", but sadly they did not.)

The Prime Minister announced "good news from Brussels". The certified herd scheme was up and running. "At long last, after the long years of Conservative failure, there is now at least some light at the end of the tunnel!"

(What happened to Douglas Hogg's scheme to beat the ban with "animal passports"? I could never work out how they'd have got the cows into those little photo booths.)

When we strayed from bucolic affairs, the Prime Minister

became more evasive. Indeed he has become a maestro at not answering questions, but in such a pleasant, jokey fashion that no one seems to mind, or even notice.

Maria Fyfe (Lab, Maryhill) pointed out that we were approaching International Women's Day. The Tories perked up. For some of them, every day is International Women's Day. Ms Fyfe wanted an assurance that the Government would be making certain that the new Scottish assembly had equal numbers of men and women. You might have read in the Guardian that this plan may be dropped for legal reasons.

Mr Blair wasn't answering that. He fully supported equal opportunities for women. Why, it was because of his changes that there were so many women on Labour's benches now. The Witches of Eastwick stirred with pleasure at Jack Nicholson's charm and completely ignored the fact that he had completely ignored the question.

Chris Mullin had a crafty ruse. He asked whether, when the time came to write his memoirs, the Prime Minister (cries of "Resign!") would be sure to give HarperCollins a wide berth?

Did he expect a wide-ranging denunciation of Rupert Murdoch's decision to lose the Patten memoirs? Of course not. He's been around far too long for that.

Mr Blair thought the question "a trifle premature", though he would certainly seek Mr Mullin's advice. "He might even merit a chapter!"

(This seems improbable. Much as I like the determined and cunning MP for Sunderland South, I don't think any publisher would be too gripped by a proposal which included a chapter entitled The Mullin Years. It's not quite up there with The Elvis I Knew, or even How I Cured Churchill's Flatulence.)

At the start of the session Mr Blair denounced the men who killed the two friends in Northern Ireland on Tuesday. "Those gunmen symbolised the past," he said. This might seem curiously unemotional, until you realise that, in Mr Blair's lexicon, not being modern is the worst thing you can say about anyone.

Narrow counter vote by EU veterinary officers, but agriculture ministers are seen as certain to lift ban

Beef exports set to resume

Stephen Bates in Brussels

THE Government last night welcomed the prospect that beef exports may resume later this month from part of the United Kingdom, exactly two years after the European Union imposed a worldwide ban in the wake of the BSE crisis.

Although chief veterinary officers from the EU's 15 member states narrowly failed to vote by a sufficient majority to lift the ban for the so-called certified herds scheme put forward by the

Government, it now seems certain to be passed by agriculture ministers meeting in Brussels on March 16.

Tony Blair told the Commons: "At long last, after long years of Conservative failure, there is at least some light at the end of the tunnel."

Only four countries voted against accepting the certified herds proposal — Luxembourg, Spain, Germany and Belgium — with France abstaining for technical reasons.

Although under EU majority voting rules that was insufficient for an immediate easing of the ban, only a

straight majority will be needed when the ministers meet.

The vote by 10 member states in favour of the British proposal is a substantial improvement on previous efforts to get the ban lifted.

A British official in Brussels said: "This is a very good result, far better than we had hoped for."

He added: "It is a good sign in advance of the meeting."

The certified herds scheme will apply to meat from cattle aged between six and 30 months, with computerised records, from herds proven to be free of BSE for at least

eight years. At present, that means only cattle from Northern Ireland will be eligible for export, because only there have computerised records been in place for a long enough time.

Ben Gill, president of the National Farmers' Union, said: "This decision is very encouraging for all cattle producers. Many will see this as a glimmer of light."

The ministerial meeting on March 16 will be chaired by Jack Cunningham, the Agriculture Secretary, because Britain currently holds the EU presidency.

The veterinary officers had

not been expected to vote for an immediate lifting of the beef ban, because throughout the BSE crisis they have shown themselves to be under heavy political pressure from their governments despite notationally being expected to act on purely scientific advice.

But they did vote down proposals backed by Germany, the most hardline opponent of any lifting of the ban, that countries that have not experienced any cases of BSE should be exempted from additional hygiene regulations requiring high risk materials, such as spinal cords and brains, to be stripped out

of carcasses before sale. That proposal, which the European Commission backed under German pressure, would not only have created a two-tier market in defiance of EU convention, but would have penalised member states which have had only a handful of cases.

There has been a growing sense in Europe that British hygiene standards have improved and little further could be expected to be done to improve beef safety, with even MEPs in a German-led committee at the European Parliament accepting the rigour of current regulations.



American troops killed 500 civilians at My Lai. Hugh Thompson, above, risked his life to end the slaughter. Martin Kettle reports



The scene of devastation after US troops rampaged through the undefended village of My Lai in 1968, in the most notorious massacre of the Vietnam war

US honours hero who defied Vietnam atrocity

FOR 30 years former United States Army Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson has been a forgotten hero, but tomorrow he will at last receive an official decoration for his part in trying to stop the most notorious massacre of the Vietnam War.

In the public ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington on which he has insisted, Mr Thompson, who is now 54, will be presented with the Soldiers' Medal for his bravery in entering the line of fire to prevent the further slaughter of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai in March 1968.

The award comes after a 10-year campaign by Mr Thompson's admirers to have his deeds properly recognised by the American military establishment, which remains

deeply reluctant to criticise itself about Vietnam.

Five hundred Vietnamese civilians were killed at My Lai when a company of US troops under the command of Lieutenant William Calley went on the rampage in the South Vietnamese village.

Mr Thompson and his two-man helicopter crew had been ordered to swoop down over My Lai as part of an operation against a North Vietnamese battalion thought to be operating in the vicinity. When they reached the village they watched as an American soldier on the ground shot dead an injured Vietnamese girl.

As he came in to land, Mr Thompson realised that the US Army's Charlie Company had gone on an uncontrolled killing spree. He and his crew saw the bodies of Vietnamese

children, women and old men piled in an irrigation ditch with others covering nearby. Mr Thompson called to the US troops to help the wounded but they responded by firing at the villagers. When he told the officer in charge to help get the villagers out, the officer

in front of the troops and ordered his crew to train their weapons on their comrades.

Mr Thompson landed his helicopter in front of the troops and ordered his crew to train their weapons on their comrades.

He said the only thing he would give them would be a hand grenade.

As a group of American soldiers, their weapons at the ready, advanced on another huddle of villagers, Mr Thompson landed his helicopter

in front of the troops and ordered his crew to train their weapons on their comrades.

Mr Thompson radioed to two gunships and together

they airlifted more than a dozen survivors to safety. "These people were looking for me to help and there was no way I could turn my back on them," he said recently.

He flew back to the village where one of his crew, Glenn

Andreotta, found a live two-year-old boy, still clinging to his slaughtered mother.

When he returned to his base Mr Thompson told his commanders what he had seen. Shortly afterwards he received the Distinguished Flying Cross but without any citation commending his actions at My Lai. Mr Thompson says the cross was awarded to keep him quiet.

The massacre at My Lai caused outrage in the United States and internationally. A year later, 25 US soldiers were charged with murder, but only Lt Calley was convicted. He became a rightwing hero and served only three days of his sentence before being transferred to house arrest.

Few Americans knew about Mr Thompson's role until he was interviewed for a BBC

documentary on the 20th anniversary of My Lai in 1988. The documentary led to the formation of a campaign to honour Mr Thompson which was rewarded by a Pentagon announcement in 1996 that he would receive the Soldiers' Medal, awarded for bravery in circumstances in which no opposing army is involved.

Tomorrow's ceremony has taken more than 18 months to arrange, mainly because Mr Thompson refused to accept a private ceremony in the Pentagon as originally offered.

Mr Thompson's fellow crew members will also receive medals. Lawrence Colburn, who aimed his gun at his own side on Mr Thompson's orders, will be present. Andreotta was killed in Vietnam later in 1968 and will receive his medal posthumously.

They were the best of friends and they were shot in cold blood

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condition in Craigavon Area Hospital in Portadown yesterday.

Fr Corrigan said he tried to comfort Damien and Philip. "The boys were lying on the ground. They were still conscious at that stage and I tried to console them. I tried to tell them, to encourage them, give them some hope. They responded for a short time

but then we were losing them. Their parents were there and I encouraged the parents to keep speaking to them and I think they were aware that their parents were there.

There was no pandemonium. Everyone was just trying to do whatever they could for the boys."

An 11-year-old girl who was with the two farmers was injured, and Bernadette Can-

van, who had been serving the customers, dived behind the bar and crawled through a doorway leading to stairs. Bullets came after her, but missed. She is 67.

She was able to call an ambulance, and help the wounded. But she lapsed into shock soon afterwards, and slept most of yesterday. Her son said that she somehow blamed herself for the two

deaths. The two victims were well-known and loved. Their fathers, Cecil Allen, butcher, and Sean Trainor, garage owner, had been close for years. No-one can remember how the boys first met, but they soon became inseparable.

Coleman Trainor, Damien's uncle, said: "Wherever Damien went, Philip went. And wherever Philip went,

Damien would be there too."

Marie Campbell, Damien's aunt, said: "They were more like brothers than friends. They had a really special bond, and they were both lovely men."

Damien was well-built and good-looking. Philip, a lorry driver, was shorter and fair. They had shared one abiding passion, cars, and used to bore some of their friends

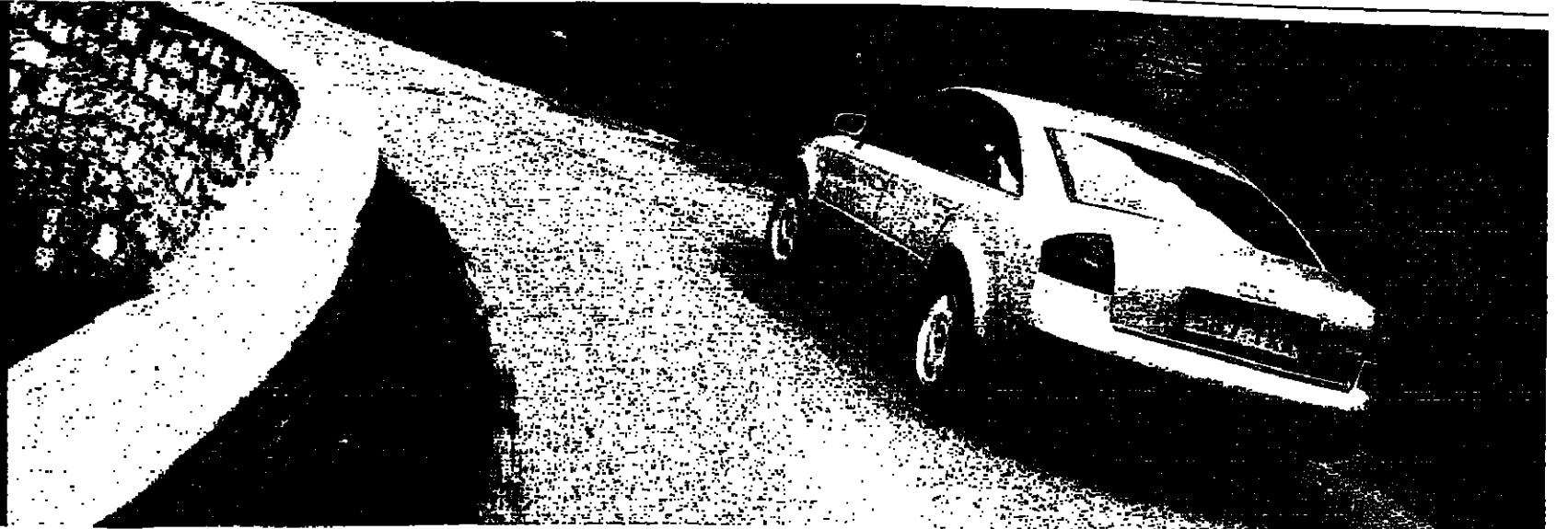
with technical chit-chat.

It was too early to be sure yesterday, but the two families are considering a joint memorial service. There will be no wedding this summer, but all of Poyntress and hundreds more from far beyond will be there for the funerals this week, determined to send their own message to those who cut the two men down.

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Steve Harkness (right) last Saturday PHOTOGRAPH ROB BALL

Soccer star's fury at racist insult

Liverpool player faces inquiry as Collymore is first to go public on alleged jibes. Ian Ross reports

ENGLISH football yesterday found itself embroiled in its most serious race row yet when Aston Villa's Stan Collymore publicly accused Steve Harkness of calling him a "coon". The Liverpool player had forced his way into the home dressing room immediately after Saturday's Premiership game between the two clubs to deliver the insult.

"I was being wound up all game and was getting racial abuse," said Collymore. "Harkness called me a coon. There were also other things said that were even worse. It was racial abuse of the worst kind and totally out of order."

"It hurt me very much indeed and I am still considering whether to make an official complaint. I went out of my way to tell the black players at Liverpool what had happened. Harkness has to live with them as well as himself."

Collymore, who joined Villa from Liverpool last summer after two seasons on Merseyside, insisted that he and Harkness had enjoyed a smooth working relationship during their time together at Anfield.

"I couldn't understand his comments because there was nothing bad between me and him when I was at Liverpool,"

we always got on all right," said Collymore.

Although there have been several cases of alleged verbal abuse in recent seasons, this is believed to be the first time a player has gone public on the details of comments claimed to have been made to him by a fellow professional.

After allegedly levelling his racist comments at Collymore, who scored both goals in Villa's 2-1 win, Harkness was apparently confronted by several other Villa players and removed from the dressing room.

Liverpool last night announced that they had launched an inquiry into the incident, which could have serious consequences for Harkness, aged 26.

It is still unclear whether Harkness will face action by the Football Association — the sport's governing body is unable to act or intervene unless it receives an official complaint. If it did an investigation would certainly follow, and Harkness could be charged with bringing the game into disrepute.

"There is a route for the club, Aston Villa, to complain to us if they so wish," said an FA spokesman.

Collymore's version of events was last night backed up by other members of the Villa camp. John Gregory, ap-



Stan Collymore celebrates the first of his two goals against his former club in Saturday's match PHOTOGRAPH RYAN BROWNE

Football's own goals

THE past 12 months have revealed a stream of incidents that have done little to promote harmony, writes Mike Ticher. In March 1997 the Bolton striker Nathan Blake withdrew from Wales's match with Belgium after accusing the manager Bobby Gould of making racist remarks in a half-time team talk and on the training ground. Gould said: "All I said was 'why didn't somebody pick the big black bastard up', something that has been said many times in many dressing rooms."

Blake refused to accept Gould's apology and has not played for Wales since.

Last month West Ham's Israeli midfielder Eyal Berkovic alleged he was on the end of anti-Semitic remarks from Blackburn Rovers players in a Cup tie at



Peter Schmeichel



Ian Wright

Upton Park. Rovers strenuously denied the charge and the matter appears to have died down.

A feud between Arsenal's Ian Wright and the Manchester United goalkeeper

Peter Schmeichel erupted last season. TV evidence seemed to support Wright's claim that Schmeichel had racially abused him, but the Football Association ultimately took no action.

pointed Villa manager last week, said: "By the time I got there it was all over. I know about it and, yes, as far as I am concerned, it is disgusting."

"People just do not use that sort of language anymore. We have several black lads in our squad and I know Stan is very

angry about what went on. I don't yet know if we shall complain as a club but Liverpool are aware of what was said."

Organisers of the "Kick racism out of football" campaign called upon Collymore and his club to make an official complaint.

"If Stan Collymore is suggesting that is what happened to him then he must make a complaint to the Professional Footballers Association and to the Football Association," said Piara Powar, the national co-ordinator of the campaign. There is still a problem with racism in the

game and players have a responsibility to give a lead to supporters."

Liverpool have jealously guarded their proud reputation as a sporting institution of impeccable character so Harkness can expect to feel the full weight of his club's disciplinary machine.

He will meet with his manager Roy Evans and the Liverpool vice-chairman Peter Robinson today to discuss the events at Villa Park.

As a club in the heart of a multi-racial community which has, in the past, had race riots, Liverpool could well decide to make an example of a player with a hitherto good disciplinary record.

Harkness could be fined, suspended, or placed on the transfer list.

Saturday's match referee Graham Poll confirmed that Collymore had complained to him that he was being racially abused during the course of the game, but made no mention of the alleged dressing room fracas in his report to the FA.

"I cannot include things in my report that I didn't see or didn't hear," he said. "I heard nothing on the pitch and saw nothing in the tunnel."

"Stan told me out on the pitch that things had been said to him; I could see he was incensed," he added.

Blair denies intention to convert to Catholicism

Michael White and Madeleine Bunting

TONY BLAIR has attended Mass alone at Westminster Cathedral several times since Christmas on Saturday or Sunday evenings, prompting speculation about the extent to which he is drawn to the Roman Catholic faith praised by his wife, Cherie, and their three children.

The Prime Minister's official spokesman confirmed that Mr Blair had attended Mass alone on at least one occasion recently, but said he was not considering converting to Catholicism. The spokesman would neither confirm nor deny that Mr Blair had been seen several times amid congregations of between 700 and 1,000 people.

The spokesman conceded there would be "a minor element of legitimate public inquiry" if the Prime Minister was planning to follow prominent Anglicans like the former Conservative ministers John Gummer and Anne Widdecombe, into the Catholic fold.

Given the long history of political antagonism between the two churches since the 16th century Reformation, and the Church of England's official status as the established church, some academic and religious authorities disagreed with Downing Street's view.

Though there would be no legal barrier to Mr Blair becoming Britain's first Catholic premier of the modern era, the issue remains a sensitive one in Northern Ireland and in parts of England and Scotland.

The Downing Street spokesman said: "Though the Prime Minister regularly worships at a Catholic church with his wife and family, he is not converting to Catholicism. The only occasion on which he has attended Westminster Cathedral alone arose because he had been at a speaking engagement and his family had attended church earlier."

Neither Westminster Cath-

dral nor the Catholic Media Office was aware that the Prime Minister had been attending the cathedral. Eight priests serve the cathedral and if Mr Blair was not taking Holy Communion, there would be no reason to spot him amongst the 1,000 people attending evening services.

Mr Blair, an active Anglican since his teens, is known to take part in Catholic services with his family on occasions. His biographers state that he became a committed Christian at Oxford and even considered entering the Church before turning to politics, but they stress that his religious belief is private, and little is known to any but intimate friends.

His inclinations are assumed to be those of a High Church Anglican.

Though Mr Blair occasionally writes on the subject, his spokesman said last night that he had found his views were easily misinterpreted. He had never, as alleged after a Sunday Telegraph article before the election, suggested that it was impossible to be a Christian and a Conservative.

He caused controversy before the election when it emerged that he had been taking communion at Catholic services in Islington with his family.

In the Catholic Church, communion is normally restricted to baptised Catholics, and Mr Blair subsequently desisted.

Mr Blair has brushed with Cardinal Thomas Winning, head of the Catholic hierarchy in Scotland, for allegedly not being robust enough on the abortion issue. Though he is personally opposed to abortion, Mr Blair regards it as a matter of private conscience for MPs.

If the Prime Minister was to convert to Catholicism, he could have to undertake instruction.

Most people follow a course known as RICA — Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults — in small groups, but public figures usually take the more discreet route of choosing a priest for one-on-one sessions.

Crash victim sues over secret TV film

Christopher Reed in Los Angeles

AN IMPORTANT issue of privacy and the media, involving a woman badly injured in a road accident who was secretly filmed, is to be decided by the California supreme court.

Ruth Shulman was filmed in 1990 lying under her overturned car with her legs in the road. The ambulance crew who tended her wore a tiny cordless microphone, and viewers could hear her moaning and begging to be allowed to die. Filming continued as she was flown to hospital.

She was paralysed from the waist down and is now seeking to sue the independent company for invading her privacy for the programme On Scene: Emergency Response.

Other "ride-along" programmes showing real events, as well as investigative documentaries using hidden cameras, will be affected by the court's decision. A broad ruling could extend to the press.

An appeal court had earlier decided that Ms Shulman had no privacy rights at the scene of the accident, a public highway, but could sue over film taken inside the helicopter. The judges ruled that a jury should decide whether those scenes were offensive. Ms Shulman's face, at first obscured by her car, was then hidden by an oxygen mask. She was referred to only by her first name.

Her counsel, Antony Stuart, argued that her voice was easily recognised by acquaintances who saw the programme. He said the production company had exploited Ms Shulman for "purely entertainment value".

"There is no social value in hearing a human being's emotional reaction to having her spinal cord severed," he said.

For the media, Kelli Sager argued that accidents were a matter of public interest and that Ms Shulman's words could have been overheard at the scene. The judge asked: "Are her personal life and her emotions open season then?"

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Opposition to £1,000 tuition charge rallies 2 million for 'biggest ever' protest, says NUS □ Vice-chancellors call action 'misguided'

Students walk out in fees protest

Amelia Gentleman

MORE than 2 million students were reported to have walked out of lectures yesterday over the Government's plans to introduce £1,000-a-year tuition fees.

The National Union of Students claimed that it was the biggest single student protest in history. The NUS president, Douglas Trainer, said: "Student anger demonstrates our depth of feeling that the introduction of tuition fees cannot be allowed to happen."

Nearly 150 colleges and universities voted to join the protest officially, but a union spokesman said the demonstration grew dramatically as students elsewhere took action spontaneously.

Lunchtime rallies and pickets were held at colleges and universities throughout the country, the NUS said. Labour backbencher Ken Livingstone spoke against his party's policy at a rally at Kingston University in west London, and the MEP Ken Coates, expelled by the Labour Party, joined the protest at a Nottingham rally.

Students in Leeds occupied a block of 25 lecture theatres in an overnight sit-in which started at 5pm on Tuesday. There were also reports of an occupation at Sheffield.

At Southampton University, about 10,000 students joined the shutdown, according to the NUS, while 2,000 students rallied outside Bristol University's Senate House.

The protest also claimed support from vice-chancellors at Liverpool, John Moores University and Kingston University. However, the chief executive of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, Diana Warwick, described the protests as "misguided" and said fees were the "only realistic way of maintaining the long-term quality of provision in higher education".

Tuition fees of £1,000-a-year are due to be imposed for the first time on full-time undergraduates this year, when existing maintenance grants will be phased out. The fees will be backed by new government loans, which will also cover living costs.

Under the proposals, one third of students will be exempt from tuition fees, and another third will pay a reduced amount.



Tony Blair hear us say: tax the rich and make them pay, students on the march in Manchester chanted yesterday

PHOTOGRAPHS: DON MCPHEE

'I care but how will demos help?'

David Ward

BEN Pyke, first year chemistry, did his bit for the campaign against student tuition fees yesterday by absenting himself from a geology practical at Manchester University.

"I'm only doing it out of laziness: it's one way of having a day off without being told off," he admitted as he emerged from the John Rylands library. "I'm supporting the boycott really, but I don't know what it's going to achieve. The Government should pay our fees: it's hard enough getting by as it is."

Over in the students' union, Nicole Mikolla, third year English, admitted that she had been to a seminar. "There were a lot of boycotts when I was in my first year and I took part then, but it did nothing."

The National Union of Students called for boycotts in the fight against tuition fees of £1,000 a year for new students from September. Leaflets spoke of national university shutdown. It did not happen in Manchester, which has Europe's biggest student population. An emergency general meeting attracted only 100 students; 500 were needed for a quorum.

Activists were not disheartened. "It's going to be a slow build," said the mature student with the megaphone who led 300 marchers through the city centre. "It's like a bomb with a long fuse." He intoned and they echoed: "Tuition fees no way! Free education here to stay! Tony Blair hear us say: tax the rich and make them pay."



Andrew Miller... 'No one listens any more'

Politics students Christopher Worsley and Andrew Miller, a reporter for the radio station Campus FM, had boycotted the march rather than lectures, preferring the warmth of the coffee bar. "I believe in tuition fees, but not in grants being taken away," said Mr Worsley.

"I don't think boycotts are the way to go about things these days," said Mr Miller. "Strikes are a thing of the past and completely ineffectual. No one listens any more. The value of a degree is being undermined because of low levels of funding. And if asking students to pay tuition fees is the way to deal with that, then so be it."

They had a bit of old-style activism on the campus last week when a posse of students invaded the corridors of power and refused to budge. The vice-chancellor was out for the day, so staff pointed out the toilets and tea room and left them there for the night. The protest concluded with a sit-down on busy Oxford Road.

Mr Miller was not impressed. "The campaign has been hijacked by the Socialist Workers Party. A lot of people care but do not want to be associated with these demos."

When he overheard that, post-graduate Mark Sabine felt compelled to intervene. The sit-down was an attempt to show students how they could make themselves noticed. It was "better than doing nothing".

Charging fees was bad enough, but ending the grant was "quite fundamentally wrong" and would cut a large section of the population off from higher education.

IVF pioneer urges drastic cut in cost of treatment

Sarah Boseley
Health Correspondent

MUCH cheaper and better IVF treatments must be found so that more childless couples can conceive, a pioneer of in vitro fertilisation said yesterday.

Speaking at a symposium in London on fertility treatment, Robert Edwards, a Cambridge University professor, said that 800,000 children had been born world wide using IVF. But he said, "we have a lot to learn. We cannot be complacent. Our techniques are just not good enough and are too expensive. We are not getting to many infertile people."

Prof Edwards and a gynaecologist, Patrick Steptoe, achieved the birth of the first so-called test tube baby to survive, Louise Brown, in 1978. Prof Edwards criticised the "immense" cost and variety of drugs used to stimulate a woman's ovaries to produce eggs, which were then mixed with sperm in a test tube and replaced in the womb. "It has turned into a pharmacological nonsense," he said.

He deplored the excessive use of hormone drugs in clinics around the world that gave "ever more drastic ovarian stimulation" and led to the woman producing very large numbers of eggs. "Sometimes they will collect 50 eggs. What am I to do with 50



Robert Edwards: 'Our techniques are just not good enough and are too expensive'

eggs?" he asked. "This has to go. We have got to put in simpler forms of treatment instead."

He predicted the use of personalised hormones, so that drugs could be tailor-made to suit each woman being treated.

He acknowledged there

were worries over the ICSI procedure, where an egg is injected with a single sperm in cases of male infertility. There has been concern that boys born by ICSI might suffer genital defects. But, said Prof Edwards, ICSI had been a breakthrough, allowing men with a minuscule sperm count to have children.

In the future, he said, it might be possible to use ICSI to carry information to the egg. One of the biggest problems now was getting the fertilised egg to adhere to the womb. "Why aren't we putting in a little gene for implantation?" he said.

However, much progress had been made in the 20 years since IVF research began. "[Then] we didn't know when a woman ovulated," said Prof Edwards. "[Now] I can tell you when — usually about four o'clock in the afternoon."

And hence, he had some advice for those trying for a baby: "The man should go home at lunchtime with a bottle of excellent French wine, they should drink it, and then do what comes naturally."

Robert Winston from Ham-

mersmith hospital in London, speaking earlier, said he believed "the future of infertility is going to be remarkable."

Like Prof Edwards, Lord Winston saw costs coming down. He said: "It is going to be much cheaper, much less demanding — especially for women."

Rousing rhetoric on LEAs' role

Guardian Debate:
Controversy rages on the costs and benefits of schools' links to councils

Vivik Chaudhary
Education Correspondent

TWO men poles apart on their views over education locked horns last night in a fiery debate over demands for more autonomy for schools.

Chris Woodhead, Ofsted head and Chief Inspector of Schools, opened the Guardian/Institute of Education-sponsored debate against his ideological adversary Tim Brighouse, the chief education officer of Birmingham.

The motion they debated was: Schools rely too much on LEAs and must stand on their own feet to be successful.

Mr Woodhead, proposing the motion, told the 1,000 guests: "LEAs do many things, some of which are essential, others not; some excellent value for public money, others not. Schools are denied these resources to raise standards."

He argued that a greater role for LEAs in schools would be more costly and would affect school achievement.

He said: "This is not a debate about the abolition of LEAs, but is a probe into the local authority's contribution to schools' improvement."

"The main responsibility for improving schools lies with the schools themselves. It's what happens in classrooms that counts. It's teachers and only teachers who can raise standards."

In a debate at times light-

hearted as well as controversial, Mr Woodhead said that schools where there was little

LEA involvement were stronger, and able to tackle problems associated with increasing the academic performance of pupils.

He added: "We all want to see such schools and every year there are more schools like this. There is a positive culture in such schools."

In a significant departure from the government line, Mr Woodhead said that LEAs still had a role to play in schools in crisis, but many did not have a clear vision of what they wanted from schools under their control. He said: "I question whether LEAs really do improve schools and are they essential? Are they invigorating?"

Mr Woodhead's views expressed in last night's debate have prompted local government officials to call for a meeting with him over what they claim is a campaign to sideline LEAs in the running of schools.

Graham Lane, chair of edu-

cation at the Local Government Association, said: "We want to meet with the chief inspector to discuss his perception over the local authority role. He will have to listen to our point of view."

He added: "He's speaking on behalf of people who don't want local government. Mr Woodhead doesn't want LEAs getting involved in the daily management of schools."

Opening his argument, Mr Brighouse said that schools were enlarged by LEAs and did not rely on them too much. He claimed that outside support for schools was vital in ensuring that problems could be tackled and resources used effectively.

However, he delivered a sideswipe at Mr Woodhead, renewing their much publicised enmity which has often exploded into heated confrontation. Mr Brighouse said of Mr Woodhead's argument: "This guy's command of rhetoric is simply breathtaking."

Sonar 'drives whales to suicide'

Tim Radford
Science Editor

SECRET naval sonar experiments may lure whales to mass suicide, according to a zoologist.

Whales demonstrate astonishing feats of accurate navigation but their ability to strand themselves and die on the shore has puzzled biologists for decades.

Environmentalists argue pollution from manmade chemicals might derange

whales; geologists suggest anomalies in the Earth's magnetic field might distort the whales' internal compass system; and some scientists worry about submarine explosions and deep sea seismic experiments. It has not, however, been easy to work out what these things might mean to whales.

Alexandros Frantzis of the University of Athens reports today in *Nature* that he has found a possible explanation for at least one episode.

Cuvier's beaked whale

hardly ever ends up on the beach. Since 1963, there have been only seven occasions when more than four of them were found ashore.

In the Kyparissiakos Gulf of the east Ionian Sea of Greece, they came to grief just once: on May 12-13, 1986. On that day and the next, 12 were found stranded alive along a 25-mile stretch of coast. Two weeks later, scientists found a 13th decomposing animal on nearby Zakynthos Island. The eight whales examined had nothing wrong with them.

The zoologists also discovered a warning to mariners of low frequency active sonar or LFAS trials, used to detect submarines. From a NATO vessel between May 11-15, the signal's frequency is low but the "noise" at more than 230 decibels is very loud.

There has been only one mass stranding in the region in more than 16 years. There has been only one LFAS trial.

"Deep-diving whales seem to be especially affected by low frequency sounds," says Dr Frantzis.

Philip Leach, legal director of Liberty, which represented the men, said the ruling was also a threat to others, including investigative journalists.

Consultant 'sold drugs'

A HARLEY Street doctor took part in a conspiracy to sell drugs illegally to addicts, a court heard yesterday.

For more than two years, Helen Sweeney, aged 62, allegedly accepted money to help feed a black market hungry

for "substantial quantities" of illicit pills. Knightsbridge crown court was told she handed scores of prescriptions to a middleman who is still being hunted by police.

Philip Shorrocks, prosecuting, said the doctor knowingly indulged in dishonesty for financial benefit.

Sweeney, of Fimlico, central London, denies one count of conspiracy to obtain controlled drugs and two similar charges to supply them.

Straw blow to immigrants

THE Home Secretary, Jack Straw, yesterday blocked a loophole that allowed young immigrants to be adopted by British couples to gain citizenship when he won a case over a poor 16-year-old Jamaican girl who was adopted by her grandparents in Leeds so that she could continue her education in the UK.

Sir Stephen Brown, President of the High Court Family Division, ruled in the Court of Appeal that her adoption papers should be cancelled because they had been sought "for the purposes of confer-

ring the right of abode". But he appealed to Mr Straw to view "sympathetically" the grandparents' application to extend the girl's visa so that she can continue school.

Gamekeeper killed himself

A 63-year-old gamekeeper killed himself because he feared a hunting ban would destroy his livelihood, an inquest has heard. Donald Sedgwick, who worked on an estate near Fakenham, Norfolk, died in November after taking whisky and paracetamol.

Ted Hughes wins again

TED Hughes's near-monopoly of book prizes continued yesterday when he won the 1998 WH Smith Literary Award for *Tales From Ovid*, written by Stephen Moss. This reworking of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* won the Whitbread Prize in January, and both it and *Birthday Letters*, his poems about his life with Sylvia Plath, are riding high in the bestseller charts. Hughes, in what has become something of a ritual, could not attend the awards ceremony.

The alleged sexual revolution started 30 years ago with the ideal of free love and ended with the reality of the sex industry.
Julie Burchill

G2 page 7

protest

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The Times's China specialist Jonathan Mirsky (above), and its editor Peter Stothard (right) PHOTOGRAPH (right) ROBIN MAYES

- Former Hong Kong governor may up stakes in battle over his book
- Stothard admits mistakes in HarperCollins row

Commentator says 'some tycoons' do more for China than China expects



Patten prepares writ for Murdoch

Kamal Ahmed and Andrew Higgins in Beijing

CHRIS Patten is set to extend his legal action against Rupert Murdoch, bringing the prospect of the two men going head to head in court.

Mr Patten's solicitor has written to HarperCollins lawyers, Alan and Overy, asking about Mr Murdoch's outspoken attack on HarperCollins, which he owns, and his assertion that the publisher "invented reasons" why it did not want to publish the book.

David Hooper, who acts for Mr Patten, said yesterday that if he did not get a satisfactory response to his questions a writ would be served on Mr Murdoch tomorrow or on Monday, alleging Mr Murdoch interfered unduly in the contract between HarperCollins and Mr Patten.

The strongly worded letter again ups the stakes in the battle between the two men which is becoming one of the most astonishing sagas the publishing world has seen.

Mr Patten's book, *East and West*, was scrapped by HarperCollins after Mr Murdoch expressed dissatisfaction that the publishers had signed the original £125,000 contract.

The book will contain passages critical of China. Yesterday it was reported that Mr Murdoch was close to a "mega-deal" in the region to set up television services which will eventually bring in vast profits. The fresh legal action will rest on Mr Murdoch's public statements in an interview on Tuesday to Ray Snoddy, the media editor of the Times, which is owned by Mr Murdoch. He said: "I did not tell people to try and censor the book or invent excuses not to do it."

"I said: why don't you go and say we would rather have someone else publish this and if there is any chance of losing money we will make good."

"They chickened out and they got themselves into the position where they were inventing reasons in the middle of January why they just didn't want to publish it which were nonsense, leaving me in a completely inexcusable position."

Mr Patten sees Mr Murdoch's words as evidence that HarperCollins manufactured reasons to drop his book.

"[Mr Murdoch] may be guilty of interfering," a source said. "We have in effect Mr Murdoch saying that there was an agreement but that he wanted to get out of it."

He also says that people started inventing things. We need some satisfactory answers to these questions or it will be for the court to decide."

HarperCollins refuses to comment on the dispute. Eddie Bell, its chairman, who was closely involved in scrapping the book, has yet to say anything publicly.

Mr Murdoch said that senior executives had "screwed up" over the deal.

The reasons for his sensitivities became clearer last night when informed sources said that the Australian-born media magnate was on the brink of a "mega-deal" to extend his media interests in China.

Star TV, the satellite channel owned by Mr Murdoch that broadcasts into China, was reported to have hammered out a joint venture with Chinese interests to sell advertising and collect subscriptions for a Chinese channel.

It confirmed the deal would be a significant boost to Mr Murdoch. Earlier this year it was announced that Phoenix, a subsidiary of Star, would be allowed to supply cable television services to southern China. Both will be lucrative deals, turning Star's losses of \$30 million a year into large future profits.

Hugo Young, page 8; Leader comment, page 9

Rupert does not meddle, Times editor insists

John Mulholland listens to a vigorous defence from a lieutenant under fire

THE editor of the Times, Peter Stothard, last night dismissed criticism of his paper's coverage of China, but admitted "mistakes" in the way he handled the HarperCollins row.

Mr Stothard also criticised rival newspapers, in particular the Daily Telegraph for having an "absolutely fixed and clear agenda" in the way they reported the story.

His staunch defence of the Times's China coverage followed comments by Jonathan Mirsky, its former East Asia correspondent. Mr Stothard also dismissed suggestions that Rupert Murdoch had influenced its editorial line.

Mr Mirsky had told a conference on press freedom: "The Times has simply decided, because of Murdoch's interests, not to cover China in a serious way."

He had also suggested that an interview between Mr Stothard and the Chinese vice-premier, Zhu Rongji, conducted during a trip to China had been quashed because "the News Corp people cause." "The [Stothard] went with decided this was not going to be reported."

"That's complete bunkum," Mr Stothard told the Guardian last night. "No News Corp person is in a position to do that. They wouldn't do that."

they couldn't... it's just beyond possibility."

Mr Stothard described Mr Mirsky's account of the trip to China as "a complete travesty of the truth". He also rejected Mr Mirsky's suggestion that he had apologised to the Chinese vice-premier after asking him a question about two Chinese dissidents, Wei Jingsheng and Wang Dan.

"I didn't apologise for raising the question. However, I did raise their plight as it seemed the appropriate thing to do given the campaign on their behalf, and he wasn't pleased. But he was perfectly polite about it and the interview ended in a perfectly normal way. It wasn't dramatic, it wasn't exciting."

Mr Stothard said the decision not to publish was based on the material he had got from the interview. "It didn't amount to a great deal. It wasn't worth writing up in my view. Did I get a good story? No. Did I want to write about it? No."

However, he admitted mistakes in the way his paper covered the HarperCollins book row. He said that they misjudged the magnitude of the story and could have spotted it earlier. "There are many ups and downs in edit-

ing a newspaper. There have been some difficult calls. We have not called them all correctly."

"I think, looking back on it, I didn't acknowledge that the original HarperCollins story would turn out to be as big, and I don't think in a sense it would have been anything like as big as it had been had it not been for the particular passion put into it by commercial rivals of the Times, mainly by the Daily Telegraph. Since I was very well aware of this passion, arguably I should have been aware of it, but sometimes the virulence and the excess, the lack of proportion, it did take me by surprise. So yes, the story was bigger than I expected it to be."

Mr Stothard rejected suggestions that his coverage of the story was influenced by Mr Murdoch's business interests in the region. He said that he had spoken to Mr Murdoch in the past week, but that this issue had not been raised.

"From the Times's point of view, you must see these are irrelevant considerations. My position on China has been consistent and clear. We supported the Patten reforms throughout more consistently

than other papers. We have had our ups and downs with some of the tactics that Mr Patten took and we have not given him uncritical adulatory support."

And if Mr Murdoch didn't own HarperCollins might the Times have covered it differently? "I don't know, to be honest... it's hard to say."

Mr Stothard dismissed suggestions that the Times's reputation for independence had suffered, but conceded that there might have been some collateral damage.

"When you have rivals who are hurting and they take any opportunity they can to damage you, it's possible to cause damage," he said.

"There's no question that the Daily Telegraph has an absolutely fixed and clear agenda to link the problems of the mishandling of Chris Patten's book with HarperCollins to the aspects of the Times they object to — in particular their charge that we don't charge enough money for it, and their leaders make it absolutely clear that their agenda. They wanted to drag the Times into this, and events have helped them."

Mr Stothard claimed it was difficult for the Times "to get on top" of the story because those with the material to

drive the story on chose to go to other papers. "We didn't do very well on the story just because the people who gave the Telegraph all that material from HarperCollins were doing so to harm us... we're not talking Pulitzer Prizes here."

"I think mistakes were made, but I think they were very small in relation to the huge waves of commercial self-interest that have been generated by this story."

"I think the main lesson really is in terms of when you judge how big a story is going to be on the BBC in the Daily Telegraph, and in the Independent, and to a lesser extent in the Guardian, you should be even more aware of the amount of self-interest involved."

And lessons for the future? "I think I will probably have a better idea of what sort of weight the story will get... maybe we can be a bit more effective."

Will Mr Mirsky continue to work as a consultant for the Times? "We haven't spoken to him," Mr Stothard said. "That will be a matter for further consultation. I don't know whether he will want to. He has a small retainer as part of a retirement package."

Times luminary deplores owner's influence on paper's view of China and Hong Kong

Kamal Ahmed

IT SEEMED, suddenly, that the underbelly of journalism had been revealed. Someone had accused the Times of scrapping coverage of China and Hong Kong because of the economic sensitivities of its owner, Rupert Murdoch.

But the accuser was not one of the more usual enemies of News International — rather the Times's former

East Asia editor, who continues to be paid by the newspaper as an expert commentator on the region.

Jonathan Mirsky was not finished yesterday. While refusing to expand on Times coverage of China, he turned his attention to Mr Murdoch's dispute with Chris Patten, ex-governor of Hong Kong.

"It is shameful," he said. "The problem with certain tycoons is that they do things for China which are more

than the Chinese expect. It is increasingly common for people who want to get on in China to debase themselves. You do not need to go to the lengths Mr Murdoch has if you are offering something China wants. And [it] wants media and technology."

Mr Mirsky, in a meeting organised by the Freedom Forum in January, accused Peter Stothard, the editor of the Times, of downplaying stories on China for fear of retribution from above. He said Mr Stothard had travelled with a News Corp delegation to China last May after being promised an interview with President Jiang Zemin.

In fact he was only allowed

a "chat" with his deputy, Zhu Rongji — who controls many of China's economic policies and will be confirmed as prime minister next week.

Mr Mirsky said that, according to a transcript of the nine-minute conversation, Mr Stothard did try to ask about human rights. Mr Zhu — who has been assiduously courted by Mr Murdoch for the last four years — said: "What kind of question is that? That is not the kind of question old friends ask each other."

Mr Stothard apologised before moving to the safer territory of economic development.

The trip came several months after News Corp visited four board members of

the Chinese government newspaper, the People's Daily, to Britain. They were shown around the Times, and "bumped into" John Major, then prime minister who had been asked to visit. Mr Murdoch has a joint internet venture with the People's Daily.

Yesterday it was becoming clear that the Times is not the first newspaper to be accused of being too closely associated with its proprietor. Donald Trullford, editor of the Observer when it was owned by the business tycoon Tiny Rowland, said it was difficult to turn down some opportunities that Mr Rowland could offer.

"I was able to see Colonel Gaddafi because Mr Rowland

had business links there," he said. "It is a two-way process. You get access as a journalist... and the proprietor gets the enhanced importance of being a newspaper owner."

"I also got to see Adrian Khashoggi, and again got a very good interview. It is a quite legitimate way to open doors to people you will not usually get access to."

"Of course, you have to make careful judgements."

Julia Langdon, former political editor of the Mirror, said that Robert Maxwell — then its owner — had organised a meeting with Deng Xiaoping. "That is the only way I would ever have got to see him," she said.

Crusader for religious harmony

Madeline Bunting Religious Affairs Editor

SIR Sigmund Sternberg, a Jewish businessman and philanthropist, has won a £750,000 prize for his work in promoting dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims.

Sir Sigmund, donor to the Labour Party and executive chairman of the International Council for Christians and Jews, is to be awarded the Templeton prize for progress in religion. It was announced in New York yesterday.

Former winners of the Templeton — endowed by American businessman Sir John Templeton specifically to exceed the value of the Nobel Prize — include Mother Teresa, the scientist Paul Davies and the British former Chief Rabbi, Lord Jakobovits.

Sir Sigmund is known as an inter-faith diplomat. Extremely well-connected, he

has been credited with significantly improving Catholic-Jewish relations. He arranged for the Pope to visit a synagogue in Rome and was instrumental in the Vatican's recognition of the state of Israel.

The judges praised his work at the International Council of Christians and Jews and at the Sternberg Centre, Europe's largest Jewish cultural centre, which he founded.

"Sternberg has tirelessly promoted co-operation, harmony and greater understanding among the world's religions, and despite the enormity of the challenge, has achieved unqualified successes," the judges said.

Sir Sigmund, a keen writer of letters to newspapers, is a controversial figure in inter-faith activities. Last year he resigned as vice-president of the Council of Christians and Jews because it refused to include Muslims in its remit.



Sir Sigmund Sternberg: inter-faith 'diplomat'

He has gone on to found the Three Faiths Forum, comprising Christians, Jews and Muslims. It will be among those to benefit from the award, Sir Sigmund said yesterday. "A lot of charities will benefit. The Three Faiths Forum desperately needs funds to combat Islamophobia. We must combat racism and

zenophobia. We want to build bridges of understanding."

Sir Sigmund has accumulated an astonishing number of medals and awards, including a papal knighthood and a knighthood from the Queen. He made his fortune in metal, property development and computer software.

He was born in Hungary in 1921 and attributes his interest in good works to his experience of anti-semitism. "I grew up with the taste of Jews killed Jesus," he said. "I had nothing to do with the murder of Jesus. Why should I be blamed?"

"We've made tremendous progress in relations between Christians and Jews in the last 50 years."

His next big project is to bring together businessmen of faith.

Sir Sigmund also hinted that he might help to find sponsors for the Millennium Dome's spirit zone. He is a keen supporter of Tony Blair.

Fatal fall follows fight on bus

Martin Wainwright

DETECTIVES are trying to find why a girl aged 13 opened the emergency door of a school bus and fell to her death.

Tanya Shand's fall came after a fight between children on board the regular City Link service home from Roundhay high school in north Leeds on Tuesday afternoon. She died of head injuries yesterday morning in Leeds general infirmary. Her distraught mother appealed to her school friends to "have the courage to tell the truth about what happened."

Yorkshire police said the episode had begun with a fight. Detective Superintendent Eddie Hemsley said: "The bus driver broke up the disturbance and asked for the names of the parties involved. The schoolchildren refused and during the impromptu stop approximately 30 children got off the bus, including one of the girls involved in the scuffle. Tanya was not in-

involved in the disturbance but she was a witness. The bus driver resumed his journey, which took him past Killingbeck police station, and told his passengers he would be stopping there to report the incident."

"Some of the children objected and it was about this time Tanya opened the emergency door and fell out. We can't completely rule out the possibility that she was pushed."

A police spokeswoman added: "We are still trying to find out why Tanya opened the emergency door, but witnesses appear to agree that this is what happened."

Police said that the bus driver, a 39-year-old local man, was helping inquiries but was extremely distressed. Pupils and staff at Roundhay high school, paid tribute to Tanya at a special assembly yesterday. The head teacher, Neil Clephan, said her friends and classmates were distraught. "We have had first counsellors here since last thing

this morning, but the school wants to continue with as normal a life as possible. We think that is best for the pupils and best for Tanya's memory."

Her mother, Maxine Shand, aged 32, of Gipton, Leeds, said that "all sorts of different stories" were circulating. She said: "We've heard separately that she jumped, she was pushed, and she fell. But Tanya isn't stupid — she would never have jumped off a moving bus. I just want the kids to have the courage to tell the truth."

Mrs Shand said Tanya had been "really popular and a nice natured girl" and had never been bullied, so far as the family knew. She added that her daughter's liver had been donated for a transplant operation in Birmingham last night, and her kidneys also offered for transplant.

Department of Transport officials examined the double decker yesterday, especially the ground floor area by the emergency exit.

An inquest will be held.



Tanya Shand, aged 13, fell to her death from a school bus in Leeds. PHOTOGRAPH: PAUL BARKER

Ted Hughes wins 2500

mekeeper led him 2-1

The 1997-98 season was a record for the club, with 100 goals scored in the league and 100 in the cup.

Turkish crisis heightens



Turkish public workers scuffle with riot police blocking Ankara's main square yesterday during a protest against a bill they say erodes union rights

EU calls on Athens to end impasse

Martin Walker in Brussels

THE European Commission sought yesterday to avoid a complete breakdown in its relations with Turkey with a thinly-veiled appeal to other member states to pressure Greece into lifting its block on the \$260 million promised to Turkey under the long-agreed customs union.

But, with the inevitability of a crisis is approaching, the Commission plans to open accession negotiations with Cyprus on March 31, a move which Turkey says will force it to respond by strengthening its links to Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus. This could mean permanent partition of the island and make it difficult for the EU to absorb it.

Europe proffered its carrot yesterday, when the Commission agreed to offer Turkey a status very close to EU membership. It would include a strengthened customs union, with virtual free trade in services and farm produce, and a range of co-operative industrial ventures and participation in EU programmes.

But this is worth nothing while Greece blocks the customs union funds, and while Athens and Ankara play

brinkmanship over Cyprus. Britain and its EU partners have little hope that Turkey will attend the London conference on March 12 designed to bring all hopeful EU members into the accession process.

The foreign affairs commissioner, Hans van den Broek, flies to Cyprus today, with Sir David Hannay as representative of the EU presidency. The United Nations secretary-general, Kofi Annan, and the United States special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, are expected on the island soon, as everyone tries to reach a deal before the end of March.

"The EU is committed to broadening and deepening our relations with Turkey," Mr Van Den Broek said yesterday. "We need to find solutions in the Council [of Ministers] to the problem of the customs union funds. It is urgent that the council adopts as soon as possible the financial regulation of the special action concerning Turkey."

The outlines of a "bizonal, bicomunal" deal on Cyprus have long been established by the UN. It offers both Greek and Turkish Cypriots almost complete autonomy, with their own parliaments in a loose federal structure.

The deal would require Turkey to hand back the third of the island's territory it has controlled since the 1974 invasion, allowing some 70,000 of the 110,000 Greek Cypriots who lost their homes then to return. But so far the Turkish Cypriots have rejected the deal, and the freshly (and narrowly) re-elected Greek Cypriot president, Glafcos Clerides, faces opposition to it from his voters.

The Commission also yesterday approved the second annual report to the European Parliament on relations with Turkey. This factual, rather than policy, document highlighted another vexing issue, Turkey's human rights record, saying: "The programme of the Turkish government has so far had no discernible effect."

It adds: "Turkey has not yet managed to define an economic strategy adequate to control the public finances, to stabilise inflation and to ensure sustainable growth."

France helps new poor

Our Correspondent in Paris

A PLAN worth \$5 billion to help France's poor, who are now known as Les Nouveaux Misérables, was revealed yesterday by the labour and solidarity minister, Martine Aubry, in the hope of ending months of protest by the homeless and unemployed.

About \$3.8 billion will come from government funds and the rest from Europe and local administrations. The measures were announced in the run-up to regional and local government elections on March 15 when Socialists, Communists and Greens are expected to make big gains from the Gaullist-centrist opposition.

The programme is intended to benefit at least 10 million people living in precarious conditions, often without

social security cover. About 225 million, a year will be spent on free medical care for some 200,000 people who are excluded because they do not contribute to health funds.

Voter reaction to the plan, described as the most important leftwing initiative after the 35-hour week, will show whether Lionel Jospin's Socialist-led cabinet has consolidated the multi-party coalition, which has been strained by disputes over benefits for the unemployed and help for the homeless.

Opinion polls show Mr Jospin's popularity rising because of his handling of social disputes and the introduction of the shorter working week. But the reforms could still be judged inadequate amid huge public support for protests by the jobless.

Ms Aubry admitted that the broad lines were inspired by unfilled plans drawn up by

the Gaullist prime minister, Alain Juppé, whose government was defeated in the June general election. After the government approved the proposals which will be discussed by parliament next month, Ms Aubry said they were intended to reduce dependence on benefits and help 3 million jobless to find work.

The three-year plan will concentrate on subsidising job training for young people in depressed areas.

All long-term jobless will receive the same special contract conditions and job training subsidies reserved for under-26s.

To satisfy protesters' demands, the lowest paid will receive income support even after finding part-time work. In an attempt to solve the housing crisis, a special tax on unoccupied flats is to be introduced in Paris to encourage owners to seek tenants.

Giscard pins last hope on votes for Vulcania

The former French president may face political extinction in his final campaign. Paul Webster in Clermont Ferrand reports

VALÉRY Giscard d'Estaing, the former president of the French republic whose unfilled ambition was to become the first elected leader of a united Europe, this week chose an extinct volcano in the Massif Central as the site to launch his last election campaign.

Aged 72, he has staked his future on local voters' approval for a 642 million scientific theme park called Vulcania — the most crucial element in his effort to retain control of his only power base, the presidency of the 47-member Auvergne regional assembly.

If the electorate disapproves, he will probably give up active politics, ending numerous disappointing attempts to return to the summit since leaving the Elysée aged only 56.

Mr Giscard, head of state from 1974 to 1981, could be the most conspicuous rightwing loser when all 22 mainland regional councils are put to the vote on March 15. The poll is expected to complete the demolition of conservative control of national and local administrations which seemed unassailable when the Gaullist president Jacques Chirac was elected in 1995.

At the time, the Gaullist-centrist coalition dominated government, parliament and the Paris council while holding most of the important posts in the regions, départements and big cities. Since then, the left has gone from strength to strength, including last June's parliamentary triumph.

Mr Giscard's mood points to another leftwing victory, further isolating Mr Chirac and adding to disarray in the Gaullist-RPR and the Union for French Democracy, founded by Mr Giscard.

Of the 22 regional councils elected in 1992, 20 were led by conservative politicians such as the former

president, who took advantage of Socialist decentralisation to administer higher education, tourism, development and transport.

During a visit to the lava-strewn Vulcania site, the Auvergne president, whose administration covers the Allier, Cantal, Haute-Loire and Puy-de-Dôme départements, blamed the sudden conservative decline on his much-despised rightwing rival, Mr Chirac.

After a press conference in a Portakabin half-an-hour's drive from Clermont Ferrand, he described last year's early dissolution of parliament by Mr Chirac, his prime minister in 1974, as "a nonsense".

Mr Giscard, the only local rightwing MP to survive the conservative rout that followed, added: "With everything going so well economically this year, we would have won easily if we had waited. I wouldn't have stood for the regional presidency again if the general election timetable had been respected."

The remark implied that only his prestige could save off-ignominious local defeat by a leftwing coalition, led by a Communist. Mr Giscard would have pre-

ferred to spend his remaining influential years in some international role, such as heading the International Monetary Fund.

"It's foreign affairs at a high level that interest me most," he said, reflecting on the time he stooped shoulder to shoulder with

many undignified twists in his political life. His friendship with the bloody Central African emperor, Jean Bedel Bokassa, and the dictator's gift of diamonds are more likely to be quoted in profiles than Mr Giscard's pioneering efforts to seek détente with the Soviet Union.

Staking his future on a volcanic theme park also lacks dignity, not least because work has stopped while government lawyers decide if Mr Giscard overrode environmental laws. Big digging machines stood immobile on the site as the former head of state talked enthusiastically of Vulcania, with its simulated underground eruptions and state-of-the-art restaurant, as if it were a miracle cure.

Leftwing opponents are worried by the expense and by whether 500,000 visitors a year would ruin a much-valued wilderness. But Mr Giscard's aristocratic condescension could be the real drawback.

Two years ago local voters rejected his attempt to become mayor of Clermont Ferrand, a city of 136,000 people. Arrogance could again cost him dear. The Communist MP expected to become the next regional president, Pierre Goldberg, said: "He behaves as if the Auvergne were his private property."

This month's polls could end Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's illustrious career

Margaret Thatcher, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and Leonid Brezhnev. "Otherwise I would like to go away and write."

Mr Giscard's last literary effort was an embarrassing love story, *Le Passage*, between an old man and a young woman — one of

World powers act on Kosovo

Ian Black
Diplomatic Editor

FEARS that Yugoslavia's crackdown in Kosovo could lead to a new flare-up in the Balkans has prompted an emergency meeting of the world's major powers.

Britain said yesterday it had called a meeting next week of foreign ministers of the six-nation Contact Group — comprising the United States, Russia, Britain, France, Germany and Italy — after weekend violence in the volatile southern province.

Governments want to act quickly to avoid the indecision and disagreement that accompanied the start of the Yugoslav wars of secession in 1991, though there are certain to be divisions about how to persuade the Yugoslavian president, Slobodan Milosevic, to end the crackdown.

Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, who was due in Belgrade for crisis talks this morning, insisted that Mr Milosevic needed a "political solution", not simply a policing solution to the crisis.

"The latest deaths show the urgency of tackling the need of Kosovo for greater autonomy within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," he said, urging Mr Milosevic to implement an agreement on education in Kosovo and to re-open schools and universities that have been closed for years.

He warned: "Until [Yugoslavia] demonstrates the tolerance of the Kosovar community and respect for their rights that we expect from a modern European state, the rest of Europe cannot take forward our relations with it."

Meanwhile, the clandestine

Kosovo Liberation Army has sworn to "wreak multiple vengeance" for the killing of 24 ethnic Albanians by Serb police last weekend.

The US and EU have warned Mr Milosevic that he faces harsher economic sanctions if he chooses repression instead of dialogue and more self-rule for the ethnic Albanians who make up 90 per cent of Kosovo's population.

Concern about the situation overshadowed Mr Cook's one-day visit to Bosnia, where he sought to underline EU support for full implementation of the Dayton peace agreement.

He told the assembly in the northern town of Banja Luka: "You implement Dayton, you create a democratic society in which human rights and the rule of law apply, and you create a tolerant and pluralist Republic Srpska as part of a modern, pluralist Bosnia. We can then welcome you into the family of European nations."

The speech was part of a campaign of support for the prime minister, Milorad Dodik, whose government was elected by the Serb parliament in January, and who has called for co-operation with Western powers sponsoring the treaty.

Earlier, in Sarajevo, Mr Cook announced two British contributions: 80 police officers to the international police task force and 2.4 million for criminal investigation equipment and training for Bosnian police forces.

He also promised \$1.3 million to pay for examinations to ensure that "The Hague war crimes tribunal, revitalised by recent surrenders by Croat and Serb indictees, has the tools to get justice done."

First war crime trial opens in Lithuania

James Meek in Moscow

MORE than half a century after the Nazis swept through the ghettos of Lithuania, murdering all but 11,000 of the country's 220,000 Jews, a court met yesterday to set a trial date for a former police chief accused of being one of the most willing bureaucrats of the slaughter.

Aleksandras Lileikis, aged 91, headed the puppet security police of Vilnius, the capital of Nazi-occupied Lithuania, during the second world war. He allegedly signed the death warrants of thousands of Jews.

Mr Lileikis denies any involvement.

The trial, expected to begin in the next four weeks, will be the first of an alleged war criminal in any of the former Soviet countries. It comes in response to accusations by Israel and the United States that Lithuania has been reluctant to face up to its past.

Mr Lileikis emigrated to the US after the war but returned to Lithuania in 1996 after a court, which had seen Nazi documents relating to his wartime role, stripped him of his US citizenship.

The court was shown warrants, signed by Mr Lileikis, condemning Jews to execution in the village of Panerai, near Vilnius. One warrant was for a six-year-old girl and her mother.

In his defence, Mr Lileikis told the US judge, Richard Stearns, that he had been "a disembodied issuer of orders", but the judge found

that tens of thousands of Jews had died under his command.

Yet it has taken heavy pressure from Israel, Washington and Jewish organisations to persuade Lithuania to act against Mr Lileikis and other suspected war criminals.

Less than a year ago prosecutors in Vilnius appeared likely to drop the case because of Mr Lileikis's poor health, despite warnings from the White House that if Lithuania wanted to join Western organisations such as Nato it would have to face past crimes squarely.

But last December the Lithuanian parliament cleared the main obstacle to prosecuting Mr Lileikis, amending the criminal code to allow suspects accused of genocide to be tried even if they were too ill to come to court.

Last week prosecutors announced they were pressing charges against a second suspected war criminal, Mr Lileikis's former deputy, Kazys Gimzauskas, aged 89.

Mr Gimzauskas had also settled in the US after the war, but his past was uncovered and he lost his citizenship in 1996. He, too, sought refuge in his homeland.

In a television interview from his sickbed last month, Mr Lileikis, who is recovering from a stroke, accused parliament of yielding to foreign pressure.

Nationalist Lithuanians preferring to forget collaboration with the Nazis, believe that world opinion concentrates too much on the Holocaust at the expense of awareness of the Lithuanians' persecution by the Soviet Union.

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Wandering mules carry two tons of drugs across Albanian border

AP in Kastoria, Greece

ELEVEN mules carrying more than two tons of hashish were intercepted in Greece yesterday in the largest known case of drug smugglers using animals to carry shipments from Albania, police said.

The mules were found before dawn travelling alone near the village of Hionato, about two miles from the Albanian border. They were loaded with 65 crates containing 4,875lbs of hashish, a police spokesman said.

Police searched the area but did not find any sus-

pects waiting to collect the drug shipment.

The mules were led to Kastoria police station and the local prosecutor will decide their fate, the spokesman said.

On at least two other occasions authorities have found mules and donkeys carrying drugs or weapons

across the Greek-Albanian border. But this is the first time police have apprehended a large mule train.

Drug and gun smuggling across the border has increased since March 1997, when Albania descended into chaos after the collapse of fraudulent pyramid investment schemes.

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The Guardian Thursday March 5 1998

Karachi's Romeo shot outside court

Richard Galpin in Islamabad

A ROMANCE which has gripped Pakistan for weeks turned tragic yesterday when a man who had defied tradition by secretly marrying his girlfriend without her parents' consent was shot and critically wounded outside a court in Karachi.

Kanwar Ahsan, who was supposedly under police protection, was shot by several gunmen as he walked up the steps to the courtroom. They opened fire from an upper floor, hitting him four times. He is in a critical condition, according to doctors.

At least 12 people have been arrested, including his wife's father and brother.

Mr Ahsan and his wife, Rif-fat Afridi, were dubbed Pakistan's Romeo and Juliet, and their case has been headline news across the country for the past month. It has already led to violent protests in Karachi, in which two people were killed.

The couple cut across the ethnic divide in the southern city — she is a Pathan and he comes from the Urdu-speaking Mohajir community. Although the two groups enjoy good relations now, hundreds of people were killed in the 1980s as the two sides fought pitched battles in the city.

The case came to light at the beginning of February, when Ms Afridi's father accused Mr Ahsan, who is 30, of abducting his 18-year-old daughter. Pathan leaders in Karachi demanded the authorities take action and threatened to call a country-wide strike unless they were caught by the end of the month. They were found by the police hundreds of miles away in Punjab and forced to return to Karachi, to be held in protective custody.

Speaking from his police cell last month, Mr Ahsan said they had married in secret because her parents had refused to give their consent. "We have not committed any crime... We have just married each other. And I'll not leave her, come what may," he said.

Ms Afridi herself appeared in court to deny that she had been abducted. "I married Kanwar Ahsan, with whom I've been in love for the past four years, of my own free will. Nobody kidnapped me," she said. "I left my parents' home because they wanted to marry me off to someone else against my will."

But her family claimed she was already married to a Pathan and started proceedings to charge Mr Ahsan with adultery — which carries the death penalty in Pakistan.

A relative of Mr Ahsan accused the authorities of criminal negligence. Kunwar Khaled Yunus said: "We the family had anticipated there might be such an attack, but the authorities had not taken the necessary measures."

Revenge taken on man who wed across ethnic divide

Revenge taken on man who wed across ethnic divide

Revenge taken on man who wed across ethnic divide



Kanwar Ahsan (centre) moments before he was shot at court

PHOTOGRAPH: IQBAL QURESHI

China's reforms ring hollow in 'echo chamber'

Communist leaders still pull the strings in parliament, Andrew Higgins in Beijing reports

EACH spring China's imperial court gathered on a plot of soil near the Temple of Heaven to set an example of disciplined industry it hoped would keep a vast, chaotically diverse country on the straight and narrow for another year.

Amid great pomp and unchanging ceremony the emperor, flanked by his finance minister and metropolitan viceroys, would plough eight furrows and then retire to the Palace of Congratulations on the Completion of Work, to be congratulated.

China today holds its modern rite of spring, the opening of the National People's Congress (NPC), an event of similarly immutable ritual and ceremonial courtship.

For all China's momentous changes, the NPC ploughs a stale furrow. Though billed as a parliament, it is little more than an echo chamber for proclamations scripted in secret by the Communist Party.

The decisions to be rubber-stamped this year are hugely important. They include the elevation of the tough economic strategist Zhu Rongji to prime minister, a plan to cut the number of apparatuses from 8 to 4 million and a multi-billion-pound rescue package for ailing banks.

The bold new wave of economic reform, however, contrasts with the stagnation of the political process. While ordinary Chinese enjoy far more personal freedom than under Mao Zedong, the institution that is supposed to represent them is stuck in a time warp.

The age of the nearly 3,000 delegates has dwindled; the laws they approve are drafted with far more precision; their tea is served by hostesses in red silk dresses instead of Mao jackets and they have a new electronic voting system. But the congress still has no real power to seriously debate, change or reject the party's decisions on policy or personnel.

"Some people regard it as a rubber-stamp organ. This image has been undergoing some changes in recent years," Zhou Wengsheng, a legal scholar at Beijing University, said. "It has not been

entirely wiped out but at least now it has become a high quality rubber stamp."

Any stirrings of independence will be suffocated by this year's appointment of the outgoing premier, Li Peng, as NPC chairman. Mr Li, who signed a decree imposing martial law during the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, has opposed any dilution of party authority. He was furious when NPC members questioned his pet project, a huge dam across the Yangtze.

Mr Li's shift to the NPC has angered a tiny dissident movement. Ding Zilin, a Beijing professor whose son was shot dead near Tiananmen in 1989, wrote a petition urging delegates to reject a man bearing "the principal and unshirkable responsibility" for the June 4 massacre.

His rejection is unlikely: 71 per cent of delegates are party members and bound by party discipline. Moreover, Mr Li, a member of the polit-



Young communists hold up a poster of the late premier Zhou Enlai, who would be 100 today

PHOTOGRAPH: STEPHEN SHAWER

buro, is the only candidate. The NPC's most potent weapon is the abstention. A large number of abstentions in the ballot to confirm Mr Li as chairman would at least signal an echo of his deep unpopularity among ordinary Chinese. A vote endorsing Mr Zhu as the new premier would show support for painful economic reforms.

There will also be a ballot to approve President Jiang Zemin, the party boss. He is likely to match North Korea's Kim Jong-il by securing close

to 100 per cent of the vote. Like the Congress of People's Deputies in the former Soviet Union, the NPC is designed to reinforce not challenge the party. The system under which delegates are chosen is so rigged that even a 35-member delegation from Hong Kong is dominated by party loyalists. The former colony's most popular political force, the Democratic Party, is entirely unrepresented. A choreographed contest for NPC seats in Hong Kong last year gave the most

votes to Jiang Enzhu, a Beijing cadre who heads the Xinhua news agency. Despite his record of impotence, however, the congress remains the only legitimate forum for public discussion and a focus for the hopes not only of dissidents but also of establishment figures who favour more representative government. Among them is Hu Jiwel, a former NPC standing committee member and former editor of the People's Daily. He wrote an essay recently in a Hong

Kong magazine urging a break with the party's tradition of authoritarianism. Mr Hu was instrumental in the NPC's first and only attempt to assume the powers granted in theory by the constitution. He and other liberal congress leaders lobbied for a special session to challenge the legality of Mr Li's 1989 martial law decree. The NPC chairman at the time, Wan Li, was effectively kidnapped and held in a Shanghai guest-house until he agreed to endorse the use of force.

Court finds ousted PM guilty of importing arms

Nick Cumming-Gruce in Phnom Penh

A MILITARY court has convicted Cambodia's ousted first prime minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, of illegally importing arms in the first of two trials widely seen as dictated more by a looming election battle than by judicial process.

Barely an hour before the trial opened yesterday two gunmen wearing military uniforms shot dead a general from Prince Ranariddh's party, Funcinpec, as he drove to work down a busy Phnom Penh street. The killing appeared to be politically motivated.

A judge sentenced Prince Ranariddh to five years imprisonment. The brief hearing at the defence ministry was crowded but diplomats were conspicuously absent. "It's a political show," an Asian diplomat said.

The charges stem from the discovery last May of a two-tonne shipment of arms destined for the prince but la-



Exiled Prince Ranariddh

belled "spare parts". Ten crates of weapons and ammunition were stacked in the court yesterday as a prosecutor charged that Prince Ranariddh "wanted to grab power for himself, so he bought the weapons to maintain power".

The prince, ousted by the second prime minister, Hun Sen, in a coup last July and now in exile in Bangkok, never denied the weapons were for his forces. But he rejected the charges, refused to recognise the court and declined to offer any defence.

The court will meet again

"They want to humiliate him. They want to use the court's ruling to show Ranariddh was preparing a coup and to legitimise their own"

Western analyst

spite several reported violations. After the trial Hun Sen has agreed Prince Ranariddh may receive an amnesty from King Norodom Sihanouk, which would allow him to return to Cambodia in time to campaign for the election at the end of July.

Hun Sen's campaign has already opened. On the eve of the trial all six Cambodian television stations carried film of officials examining the arms shipment and movements of royalist forces just before the July coup. "This is the point that will kill Ranariddh dead in front of the court," Hun Sen said.

"They don't care about Ranariddh's conviction, they want to humiliate him," a Western analyst in Phnom Penh said of the government's strategy. "They want to use the court's ruling to show he was preparing a coup and to legitimise their own."

But even as the trial goes ahead, diplomats remain uneasy that the peace process may collapse. "Here there's so little room for compromise," one said. "The winner takes all, the loser gets killed."

WORLD NEWS 7

Second term for straight-talking Israeli president

Julian Borger Middle East Correspondent

EZER Weizman, Israel's outspoken president, won a second term in a parliamentary vote yesterday, easily beating a challenger backed by the prime minister.

After winning the secret ballot 63-49 against Shaul Amior from Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud party, Mr Weizman, aged 76, said he had no plans to button his lip in his second term.

He shrugged off criticism that he had strained the limits of his ceremonial post by persistently sniping at Mr Netanyahu's right-wing policies.

"Leave my image alone," he said. "I will behave as I think I should and I will not change anything."

The president and prime minister have waged a near-constant battle since 1993, with Mr Weizman's off-the-cuff remarks and hostile press briefings over the Middle East peace process and the limits of each other's authority. It

reached a peak last September when Mr Weizman appealed to the United States secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, to "knock heads together" and exert more pressure on Mr Netanyahu to make concessions to the Palestinians.

Mr Netanyahu lobbied hard for Mr Amior, a little-known mayor from northern Israel, but in a live television link-up after yesterday's vote, he and Mr Weizman promised to bury the hatchet.

The Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, was quick to send congratulations, thanking Mr Weizman for "his efforts to protect the peace process".

Mr Weizman's win reflects his high approval ratings — often more than 70 per cent — in opinion polls, though he has angered a string of interest groups with his off-the-cuff remarks. He recently caused consternation among Orthodox rabbis by advising Jews to skip some "unpleasant" sections of the bible.

News in brief

Zimbabwe unions keep up strike

WORKERS in Zimbabwe continued their two-day national strike yesterday, bringing industry and commerce to a standstill in a rebuff to President Robert Mugabe's government. Although some shops resumed limited activity yesterday, factories remained closed both days to protest against tax increases and rising food prices.

The minister of industry and commerce, Nathan Shamuyarira, had said the government would "punish" strikers and industrialists who shut factories. But lawyers say it has no legal right to take such measures. — *Andrew Meldrum, Harare*

Police rap lyrics

A UNITED STATES rap artist convicted on firearms charges in a 1994 shooting is back in jail because authorities say anti-police lyrics on his latest album violate conditions of his parole. Shawn Thomas, known as C-Bo, was arrested on Tuesday and held without bail. He is charged with threatening public officials, promoting violence against public officials, and promoting a gang lifestyle, criminal behaviour and violence against law enforcement. Authorities claim his lyrics threaten Sacramento's district attorney and sheriff, among others. — *AP, Sacramento*

Saudi prince urges change

IN A RARE public comment by a Saudi Arabian royal, Prince Talal Bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud, half-brother of King Fahd, yesterday urged the kingdom and other Arab states to move towards "real" elections. "Are we more backwards than other countries to hold real elections that are cosmetic?" he said. Speaking from Beirut where he is attending a Unesco conference, Prince Talal said the consultative Shura council should be used to give ordinary Saudis a say in the kingdom's daily affairs. — *Reuters, Beirut*

Rebels claim soldiers killed

COLOMBIA'S Marxist rebels claim to have killed as many as 50 soldiers in heavy fighting this week in a remote area of the country's southern jungle, security sources said yesterday. A rebel commander of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia claimed that between 40 and 50 guerrillas had been killed in Caqueta province since Sunday. The armed forces chief, General Manuel José Bonett, said he was unable to rule out the loss of as many as 50 men. — *AP, Bogotá*

Magritte romances Brussels



A WOMAN looks at the two paintings *Lover* and *The Son of Man* at the René Magritte exhibition in Brussels

PHOTOGRAPH: HERWIG VERGULT

Borneo haze descends

THICK haze from wildfires raging on Borneo Island is snarling air and river transportation and blocking sunlight from the area's crops, it was reported yesterday. Wildfires and drought have hit the Indonesian part of Borneo Island, threatening crop failures, food shortages and a return of last year's smog haze. In Muara Taweh, in central Borneo, people have to wear face masks for outdoor activities. — *AP, Jakarta*

No light at end of tunnel

AUCKLAND's hopes of a return to full power have been dashed for weeks after two repaired main cables failed during testing, the electricity supplier to New Zealand's biggest city said yesterday. Central Auckland was plunged into darkness on February 20 when the last of four main cables into the city failed. A spokesman for Mercury Energy said there could be no guarantee of stable, normal supplies perhaps until late April. — *AP, Auckland*

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Comment

Diary

Matthew Norman

THE fame of Charles Bronson, Her Majesty's most brusquely bearded house guest, grows. Interviewed over 200 pages of *TIME* magazine, he is in excellent form. Although best known for taking four Iraqi prisoners in Belmarsh (he made them call him "General"), and for one to tickle his toes, while waiting for a helicopter to Cuba, Charlie prefers another hostage episode. "Reunited with my son after 22 years," he says, when asked about his happiest moments, "and kidnapping governor Wallace at Hull jail. The seven years extra was worth it to see him cry." Charlie remains engaged to Joyce Connor, his regular girlfriend since he split with previous fiancée Bertha, a medicine ball. Meanwhile, a talented cartoonist and poet, he is also moving into music, and recently recorded an album of Louis Armstrong's *What A Wonderful World*... an intriguing choice for one in an art by soft cell underneath Wakefield prison. But then Charlie is a most intriguing man.

LETTER arrives from Labour MP Truscott explaining why his question to the European Commission about how much Hertfordshire has received from funds set up to help former Soviet bloc countries was extremely sensible. He makes a sound point, and if I ever work out what it is, I'll pass it on. Meanwhile, Dr Truscott appears again in the weekly *European Voice*, this time over the stern warning he issued — unilaterally, in a press release — to Saddam Hussein, "Saddam Hussein, he is thunders, 'is drinking in the last chance saloon.'" And Kofi Annan dares take all the credit!

THE claims of Diary vicar Steve Chase to be considered "the man who most coherently defines the zeitgeist" receive a boost. A charity video Rev Steve made in 1994 arrives, and it features D-Ream's *Things Can Only Get Better*. This, of course, was long before New Labour appropriated the tune. We call the multi-media man of God, who moonlights as a Baptist minister in South London, and say that he seems very close to New Labour. Would he describe himself, in fact, as the John the Baptist to Mr Tony Blair's Jesus Christ? "Er, no, I don't know," says the Reverend. "You know, the great thing about John the Baptist is that he was a voice crying out in the wilderness. A vagrant. A no one." The Reverend's next Diary sermon, which brings in Frank Field, will deal with Jesus's contentious remark about the rich man and the eye of the needle.

WHILE Germaine Greer works on her sequel to the *Female Eunuch*, a rival emerges. In BBC Grand Prix 98 magazine, Bettie Hill recalled the driving era of her late husband Graham. "Girls expected racing drivers of that era to do things like that — to be cheeky. My old man, he would put his arm around one of those girls who used to turn up in the pits, and invariably it would end up on her bosom. It was fun! The girls expected it and everybody laughed about it and enjoyed it." Column in the *Spectator* for a Mrs Bette Hill, column in the...

POLICE in America have managed to arrest an armed felon without resorting to SWAT teams. On learning that Eric Whitover was working in a New Hampshire pizza parlour, they simply ordered one small deep pan, no toppings, and waited. Handcuffs ready, until he arrived on his moped.



Chinese walls don't work in News Corp: Murdoch always gets his way

Hugo Young



CONSIDER a Rupert Murdoch who does not exist. Imagine a man of sensitivity, a respecter of free speech, the owner of newspapers whose purpose he values, a publisher to be found at the peak rather than in the gutter of his trade. Grant, also, that in spite of these disabilities he remains a tycoon of global reach, as rich and powerful as the actual Murdoch is. Such a Murdoch, for all his incredible virtues, would still be in some difficulty with people who had a less sophisticated understanding of the freedom to publish than he did.

People like the Chinese Government, for example. For Chinese commissars, the notion of free speech as anything but free trashery is incomprehensible. And even if capitalism has cut a few chinks in the darkness, there remains the overriding question of control. To the totalitarian mind, it is unimaginable that the boss is not responsible for everything over which he presides. Just as the control-freaks of Blairism are sometimes the victims of their brilliant record in news management, so Murdoch, even my virtual Murdoch, is the victim of his legendary power. In China, he's fated to work on the assumption that they will blame him for everything that's said and written in his organs.

Even if this Murdoch had wanted to publish Chris Patten, therefore, he could not with impunity have done so. Even if he wanted *The Times* to print the unvarnished truth about China, he would face the certainty that they knew he was in control: therefore that he wanted to embarrass them; therefore that he wasn't a man they could do business with. This is the burden of the global imperialist.

the down-side of his power. Or rather, the down-side for the peons who run his businesses. For Murdoch himself cares nothing for this freedom stuff. We're now back with the real thing, not the construct. Not the man of letters, the valuer of serious journalism, the defender of truthful publishing, but an owner who despises most of the people who produce his papers and doesn't promote any other purpose of journalism than the raising of profits, the beating of the competition and the defence of the multifarious interests of News Corp.

Peter Stothard, the editor of the *Times*, defending himself against Jonathan Mirsky's latest revelations about his China coverage, says that he has "never taken an editorial decision to suit Mr Murdoch's interests." This seems an extravagant statement, but let's enter another imaginary world, where this is in the editor's mind, true, and he is pristine in his distance from the ugly business of corporate interest, free to commission and publish journalism uncontaminated by a particle of Murdoch. The problem is the evidence, to which fact nobody believes him.

This may be terribly unfair. It could just be that the failure to use Mirsky's contentions was the judgment of an editor who thought China had suddenly ceased to be a story. Perhaps it is imaginable — perhaps we have a duty to persuade ourselves — that the years of propaganda that have passed for *Times* reportage of the European Union proceed from the editor's very real Euro-scepticism rather than Murdoch's intense dislike of regulatory powers, operated by a multi-national agency, that have some

chance of challenging his own power to brush national governments aside. Maybe, at the other end of the scale, the Sun's sudden *Dome* switch, from scorn to ecstasy, began with a lightning insight on the editor's road to Greenwich that had nothing to do with BSkyB's sponsorship deal. And of course, we must accept that the *Times*'s early failure to do any kind of justice to the appalling shenanigans at HarperCollins, the putative Patten publishers, was due to a three-day cock-up by its media editor rather than any embarrassment, any hideous uncomfortable awareness, that this posed a corporate PR problem best met by silence.

VERY possibly all these things are true. But if the imaginative leap is less than easy to make, it's because News Corp sits like a rod across the backs of all who work for Murdoch, crushing innocent and venal alike. Readers are not fools. They know how business works. They know how they themselves would function in this corporate structure, and are unwilling, in the light of the evidence, to confer on either Mr Murdoch or his editors the saintly indifference to corporate pressures that Mr Stothard is apparently asking them to believe in.

We see more clearly the limits of this kind of proprietorship of the word. At a certain point, it becomes disavowed from the right to have the words it owns believed. Even the most honourable purveyors of these words are degraded by the environment in which they appear. Nothing under the Murdoch imprint is really to be trusted any more. What the reader is always obliged to be aware of

is a possibly undisclosed agenda requiring either deformity or silence, even when that agenda doesn't in a particular case exist. And because Rupert Murdoch is not the paragon of my fantasy, editors do not last long if they forget it.

Where does this leave the owner, and the country in which he exerts such a baleful influence? Unduly respected by governments, for one thing, Mrs Thatcher gave him all he wanted, on the ground and in the air, without any understanding of how this tainted her. Prime Ministers should realise to what it is they are now-towing: not a man whose driving concern is a view of the British public interest they might share, but whose solitary passion, as media owner and Flying Dutchman, circling a world above citizenship, is the quest for power and money. He's as profoundly uninterested in welfare-to-work as he is in the truth according to Lord Rees-Mogg, just so long as neither imperils his tax-havens or satellite footprints around the globe.

The empire works by mutually seamless understanding. Murdoch said on Tuesday: "I have never been under any pressure from the Chinese or asked to do anything." His editor said on the same day: "I have never taken an editorial decision to suit Mr Murdoch's interests, nor have I ever been asked to." They seem to believe this makes them free. But who needs to ask for anything, when the reality of power is so perfectly understood? Murdoch would like to own the word because the very mode of his existence renders it, in his hands, void of credence. In his world, nothing is free, and neither fact nor comment is sacred.

The spaniel rolls over

Roy Hattersley



MICHAEL MEACHER is on message at last. The man who once gloried in the title of "Tony Blair's representative on earth" and was, as a result, denied the cabinet rank which his earnest talent justifies, has succumbed to the amorphous charm of presentational politics — the triumph of appearance over reality.

Last Sunday, surrounded by the yeomen of England who had travelled to London for the countryside march, he spoke of the Government's hope that "conciliation" would bring together the fox hunting fraternity and the anti-blood-sports lobby. Perhaps Mr Meacher — who is a clever man — has already worked out the basis of a compromise which would reconcile two apparently diametrically opposed opinions. Hunts could be required to use only artificial hounds, or the dogs could be trained to maim rather than kill their quarry. But, on the face of it, the pursuit of a settlement which satisfies both parties seems improbable.

Indeed agreement seems so unlikely that it is impossible not to speculate about why the intellectual Mr Meacher said anything quite so soft. The most likely answer is that, last Sunday afternoon, the Government wanted to calm down the hunting lobby and the idea of conciliation seemed the best way to do it. Michael Meacher drew the unconvincing straw.

MINISTERS continue to be wonderfully tough towards the weak. But, faced with either money or muscle, it rolls over on its back and kicks its legs in the air like a spaniel — and the general public is beginning to notice. So the Government's long-term reputation is being put at risk by its obsession about winning the short-term approval of vested interests which it should treat with cautious disapproval. The party which won the most brilliant election campaign in political history has followed its triumph with a series of public relations fiascos. All of them have been the result of desire to please the wrong people.

The pattern of self-inflicted embarrassment began with the confusion about the timetable for entry into the single European currency. It continued with the capitulation to Bernie Ecclestone over Formula One tobacco sponsorship and reached its absolute nadir with what is now accepted as the presenta-

tional catastrophe of the looseparent benefit. The damage was extended by the refusal to protect threatened newspapers from being driven out of business by their competitors' predatory pricing.

No doubt all those decisions gave great pleasure to Labour's old enemies. Rupert Murdoch rejoiced about the equivocation over Europe and was relieved to learn that, if the Government had its way, he would continue to devour his rivals. The motor racing lobby were undoubtedly delighted that it would not be prevented from per-smoke, and the hard-faced men who did well out of Margaret Thatcher's tax reduction certainly applauded the tough treatment of unmarried mothers, whom they regarded as expensive irresponsibles. But it will be interesting to see how long their gratitude lasts or if it makes up for the loss of principled support that the Government risks by becoming the flexible friend of every powerful pressure group.

Last weekend, in the village I know best, I was stopped in the street and asked why David Blunkett only discovered the importance of rural schools during the week before the countryside march. And, on the train back to London, a senior member of the CBI spoke of the Government in language which suggested that capitulation does not always guarantee respect. I could not prevent my industrial acquaintance from describing

Faced with money or muscle, the Government kicks its legs in the air

in loud (and therefore embarrassing) detail his amusement at ministers' response to the employers' proposals for improved industrial relations. In opposition, Labour had been categorical. If a majority of employees voted for trade union recognition, then the trade unions would have the legal right to be recognised. But the bosses felt no obligation to endorse the Government's mandate. So the CBI came up with a bright idea about the definition of a majority — not most of the people voting in the ballot, but most of the people employed in the company.

Knowing that such a refinement would destroy the whole scheme, the suggestion was offered — at least according to my informant — "as a negotiating position. Something to be knocked out before we argued about the real consequences." Imagine his surprise when he read in the papers that the Government found the CBI proposal had attractions. The dangerous thing about Danegeld is not just that the Danes keep coming back and asking for more. Other people follow the Danes' example.

US plans would banish genuine organic produce

Food fascism

George Monbiot

OPRAH WINFREY is an unlikely hero of the battle against big business. Yet the case she won last week, in which she established her right to express an opinion about the merits of eating beef-burgers, ranks with the McDonald's libel trial as one of the few serious setbacks suffered by the agro-industrial combines seeking to monopolise world food production.

She had been sued, by a syndicate of monster cattle ranchers, under the survival "food disparagement" laws introduced in 14 American states to prevent people from questioning such practices as feeding bovine offal to cows. These laws are a compelling demonstration of the lengths to which US legislators will go to defend the interests of corporations

against the interests of the citizenry. We can only be thankful that there's an ocean between us and American plutocracy.

Our happy state won't last, however. Winfrey might have won her battle, but the war waged by an industry that can tolerate no dissent has only just begun. Its latest attempt to silence criticism and eliminate good practice is already well-advanced, and this time the consequences for Britain are just as profound as the consequences for America.

ON MARCH 16, the US Department of Agriculture will close its consultations on a new national standard for organic farming. Its proposals have horrified small farmers, consumer groups and animal welfare campaigners. If adopted and implemented as protesters predict, they will outlaw

genuine organic production all over the world.

The USDA would allow fruit and vegetables to be labelled "organic" in the United States which have been genetically engineered, irradiated, treated with additives and raised on contaminated sewage sludge. Under the new proposals, "organic" livestock can be housed in batteries, fed with the offal of other animals and injected with biotics. "Organic" produce, in the brave new world of American oligopoly, will be virtually indistinguishable from conventionally-toxic food.

The solution would seem to be obvious: genuine organic producers should call their food something else. But the USDA is nothing if not far-sighted. The new proposals prohibit the setting of standards higher than those established by the department. Farmers will, in other words, be for-



bidden by law from producing and selling good food.

The next step, if these standards are adopted in the United States, is not hard to anticipate. American manufacturers will complain to their government that the European Union is erecting unfair barriers to trade, by refusing to allow them to label the poisonous produce they sell here as organic food. The US Government will take the case to the World Trade Organization. The WTO will refer it to Codex Alimentarius, the food standards body dominated by corporate scientists. The Codex panel will decide that they cannot see any difference between American organic produce and European organic produce, and the WTO will threaten Europe with punitive sanctions if it continues to maintain the higher trading standard. This is precisely the means by which Euro-

pean consumers are being forced to eat beef and drink milk contaminated with injectable growth hormones. There's no mystery about why US agribusiness wants its Washington subsidies, the USDA, to set these new standards. The consumption of organic food is rising

Farmers will be forbidden by law from producing and selling good food

by 20-30 per cent a year and, in some countries, is likely to become the dominant land use. Organic farming is labour intensive. It responds best to small-scale production, matched to the peculiarities of the land. Big business simply can't operate in an environment like this. There is no poten-

tial for hegemony. What it can't control, it must destroy.

The United States government claims to be the champion of free trade, but it is, in truth, emphatically opposed to it. It seeks instead to exercise a coercive power of central control and legislative dictat, on a scale which makes the command economies of the old Soviet Union look like a village paper-round.

I've long believed that we should be allowed to vote in US elections, as their outcome affects us almost as much as it affects the Americans. British people now have a brief opportunity to do the next best thing, and demand of the USDA that it drops this attempt to smother the seeds of rehabilitation. There are no new standards come into force, our own Government will be powerless to protect us from the consequences.

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the spaniel
rolls over

by
letters



Breaking Rupert's grip

He must be taken on

THE titans of British letters have made a horrid discovery these last few days. They have been shocked — shocked — to learn that Rupert Murdoch is not a custodian of intellectual freedom. Legions of authors who had signed contracts with the Murdoch-owned publishers HarperCollins have been appalled to see that the Australian is not a domineering patron of scholarly inquiry, but a hard-headed businessman. He regards the literary house he owns as a mere component of a vast media empire — permitted to do nothing which might damage his overall corporate interests. Yesterday journalists joined the outbreak of jaw-dropped surprise. They read — no, they were horrified to read — claims by a Times insider that the paper's coverage of China is influenced by the business needs of its proprietor. The shock of it!

Everyone should know by now what Rupert Murdoch is and how he operates. The dropping of Chris Patten's memoir for fear of offending Beijing should surprise nobody. The likes of Peter Hennessy, Simon Haffer, Sir Frank Kermode, Simon Schama and Ben Pimlott — the lead troops in the "authors' revolt" sparked by the Patten affair — ought to have known what they were getting into the moment they took the Murdoch shilling. Who did they think was paying their wages? Rupert Murdoch is hardly a new player on the world stage. His methods have been clear to see for decades. As Jonathan Mirsky, the former East Asia editor of the Times, points out — the tycoon

has never made any secret of his business creed. Asked why he dumped the BBC from his Star TV service for Asia, Mr Mirsky recalled Mr Murdoch's response: "I didn't see why I should be in charge of things that made the leaders of China angry when they are people with whom I wish to do business." There it is, in black and white.

Rupert Murdoch is not a university chancellor, and HarperCollins is not an institute of learning. He can publish — or not publish — whatever books he wants. The left-wing Victor Gollancz would not have published Oswald Mosley in the 1930s; a left-wing house would not print a British National Party manifesto now. By the same token, Mr Murdoch is under no obligation to publish a book he disagrees with — whether for political or financial reasons. Nor should anyone be too stunned to read Mr Mirsky's description of the Times' relationship with the collective dictatorship that runs China: a grovelling interview with the vice-premier, later suppressed; an all-expenses-paid junket for a clutch of Beijing apparatchiks; awkward stories ignored. Just as there is a Murdoch line on Europe (sceptic) or British politics (Blairite), there is one on Asia. If a readers are looking for objective coverage of the news, most know better than to turn to ideologically-committed newspapers — whether on the left or right. The fact that the Murdoch policy — on China or anything else — is driven by bottom-line pragmatism, rather than heartfelt conviction, makes little difference.

The sooner all this is acknowledged the better. Instead of playing the virgin in the brothel — disgusted by what we see — we should recognise Rupert Murdoch for what he is. We ought to drop the delusion — self-serving in the case of the HarperCollins authors — that there are little enclaves

within the Murdoch empire, free of the meddling hand of the boss. HarperCollins, we now know, is as much the Australian's plaything as the Sun or Sky TV. None of this is a defence of Rupert Murdoch. On the contrary, the pretence of "editorial independence" has been punctured once and for all. It's clear that Mr Murdoch interferes or influences every media organisation he owns. Instead of being shocked, we must now work to ensure he owns less. The Government should take its cue — and do whatever it takes to reduce the magnate's multiple grip on the nation's media.

Gravy trained

Who will save the railways?

IF BRITAIN'S privatised railways could run trains as efficiently as they make fast bucks for shareholders and directors, we would all be in their debt. In reality the very worst fears of pre-privatisation pessimists are coming true. This week a leaked letter from the Health and Safety Executive to Railtrack (now worth nearly £5 billion on the stock market compared with a flotation value of £1.8 billion) warned that in three cases the track was "in such an extremely bad condition so as to be unsafe". Railtrack should not be allowed to acquire the fast rail link from London to the Channel Tunnel until it has proved it can run the rest of Britain's network properly.

It also emerged this week that First Group (which runs buses and the Great Eastern Railway) is planning a bid for Great Western, whose routes were described yesterday by Save our Railways as "slower, later and more complained about than they were under public ownership". If allowed, this move would merge two net-

works that were broken up by privatisation thereby reducing the competition it was supposed to bring. Despite the deterioration in service, the directors of Great Western will undoubtedly become multi-millionaires if the merger is allowed through. In a report published today, the Audit Commission criticises the privatisation of the three companies that lease rolling stock to the train operating companies on the grounds that they were sold too cheaply. They were purchased for £1.7 billion by private sector companies and then resold for £2.6 billion. The Commission reveals that when privatised they were making a (high) pre-tax return of 41 per cent on sales even though 80 per cent of their leasing income was guaranteed by government until up to 2004. Nice work if you can get it.

There are some encouraging features of privatisation — like this week's huge order for tilting trains by Virgin — but the general picture is of the public being taken for a ride by companies making money from the sea of public subsidies that still regurgitates around the system while failing to provide what everyone craves: a decent railway system that could play a leading role in taking freight and people off the roads. Labour talked tough before the election. If it matches that with action, it will find the public strongly behind it.

Derry's den

William Morris would approve

FOR THE baying members of the hunt, the pursuit of Lord Irvine over the cost of re-decorating his state apartments has been rollicking good fun. The no-expense-spared refurbishment has given the impression that his Lordship rivals Marie Antoinette

in terms of political sensitivity. He would certainly struggle to win any awards for PR. But is that such a bad thing? These pillorying the Lord Chancellor tend also to be those shedding crocodile tears for the dumbing down of politics. One of the main criticisms of Westminster is that it is awash with on-message automatons and short on characters. Well, the Lord Chancellor is certainly a character.

What's more he has a case. The House of Lords is a Grade One listed building and it should be looked after properly. Pugin-style wallpaper — even at £300 a throw — is right for the state apartments in the House of Lords: woodchip and emulsion, whether from B&Q or Homebase, is not. The Lord Chancellor may have been unwise to mention DIY stores, but that doesn't detract from his argument.

There is something po-faced and hypocritical about the attacks. For the Right there is something deeply suspicious about socialists enjoying the good things in life, while the Left has always had its puritanical wing. In fact, Lord Irvine is merely following a noble tradition that dates back more than a century to Labour's roots in William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement. Morris saw socialism as the contrast between beauty and ugliness, and between the worker as artisan craftsman and the worker as slave to the machine. In an era of mass output, it is good the Government is helping high-quality small firms to thrive.

Finally, the Lord Chancellor (and Peter Mandelson at the Millennium Dome) are living proof that Old Labour lives on. In Keynesian fashion, they are using public money to boost employment. While the Prime Minister has spent the past year eulogising the market, his two closest allies are engaged in good old-fashioned tax and spend.

Letters to the Editor

Shanghaied into a facelift

YOU mention Rupert Murdoch speaking to my colleague, James Fringle, the Times correspondent in Peking, about writing an article on Shanghai (Patten published "screwed up", March 4). Mr Fringle has assured me that Mr Murdoch only spoke favourably of the city and made no suggestion for writing an article on it, and that there was no connection between that conversation and the subsequent request from the Sun to write an article on Shanghai. Jonathan Mirsky, London.

ANNE Karpf said of the Countrywide March's Radio station that "you could hear the Duke of Westminster's millions in the jingles alone". "The Countrywide March's own radio station... with won every step of the way." Well the jingle wasn't thought up by expensive media consultants. I thought it up on unpaid overtime. What's more, I'm willing to bet that Anne Karpf's psyche is bigger than mine. Thanks for the compliment, though. The march was funded not by a duke, but by thousands of small donations and helped by volunteer labour, like my own. Nigel Burke, Countrywide Alliance, London.

COULD Lord Irvine share his decorating tips with the Queen? Replacing her polystyrene ceiling covers by ones that would last 600 years could prove both cost and life saving for her subjects (Palace ceiling falls but band plays on, March 4). W. Hipperson, Lindfield.

The Country Diary can be found on Page 10

On sparks at Marks

AS A liberal lawyer who has followed the World in Action case quite closely, I am surprised that you have not reported the real difficulty in asking a jury to decide a meaning before they have heard all the evidence in a libel trial (Buried by libel, March 4). "This was highlighted in the World in Action case where the jury decided that they did not like either Marks & Spencer's meaning or Granada's meaning in relation to the allegations of the use of child labour. Instead, they drafted their own meaning, which appeared to have elements of both meanings in it."

The judge was then faced with a request from Granada that further questions should be asked of the jury to ascertain what their meaning actually meant. His decision that he could not do that was the subject of an appeal by Granada when the case actually

settled. The Court of Appeal would have been faced with interpreting the jury's meaning, or potentially ordering a retrial. In the light of this experience, I am not sure that the court is going to be anxious to repeat the experiment. Susan Aslan, London.

ONE wonders if anyone will ask what happened to the girl workers? As a result of the TV programme, all the girls under 15 were dismissed from the factory. No effort was made to provide compensation, alternative means of support, or vocational training. Studies have shown since that the girls — for whom the garment jobs, however exploitative, were a necessary choice — could not easily find other skilled work. Most had to become domestic or marry, some resorted to prostitution. Some of their families found

themselves in serious debt since they had relied on their daughters' earnings.

Did Marks & Spencer or Granada consider this aspect of their quarrel? Apparently not. From the perspective of the manufacturers and retailers, and of the TV producers, the affair exclusively concerned the company's reputation. This kind of exposé does very little for child workers in Morocco or elsewhere. Maggie Black, Oxford.

SO, Marks & Spencer didn't know that products were being mislabelled and made by children. Is this cause for celebration? Externally verified Codes of Practice and Social Auditing would tell them. Graham Young, General director, Tradescraft Exchange, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear.

Clearing out over-stuffed cabinets

I AGREE with Jonathan Freedland that the cabinet should be reduced but missed the obvious one. MAFF should be rolled up into the DTI (Do we need such a big cabinet? March 4). Perhaps the nonsense of subsidising agriculture when no other industry is subsidised would be more readily apparent.

On his point about reforming the House of Lords, a powerless second chamber would be pointless. Only one chamber can have the power if they are elected on the same basis. Why not elect members to the second chamber for life? This would have the advantage of freeing members to vote on conscience rather than by party as the threat of job loss would be gone. John Hewett, Tounham, Surrey.

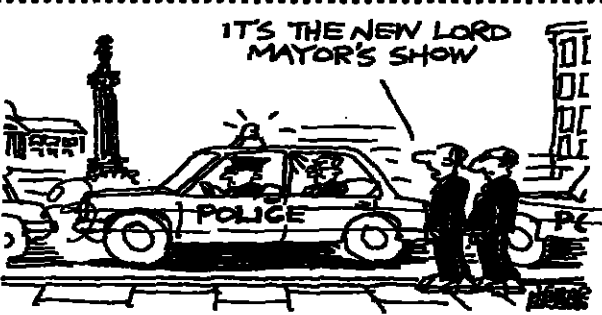
JONATHAN Freedland is no doubt right about the group dynamics of having the equivalent of two football teams sitting around the Cabinet table. But the very complexities of governing a modern state which make him prefer the size to Mr Blair would still create problems for his "mega ministries".

For instance, if the Stormont talks failed to produce the swift demilitarisation of Northern Ireland, would troops deployed in the province be under the aegis of the Foreign Office? That would be game, set and match to Sinn Féin, I think. Rev Robert Tittley, London.

IT SEEMS to me that having 22 ministers in a nation's cabinet is quite the norm.

From Canada to France, many nations have 20-plus cabinet ministers.

I do, however, believe this number to be too much. My country is the exception to the rule: in America, we have only 16 ministers: the Secretary of State, Treasury, Defense, Commerce, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Veterans Affairs, Energy, Transportation, Labor and the Interior, plus the Attorney General and the Trade Representative, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Advisor (the last two are not considered department secretaries) and so on. The President's Cabinet. Daniel Kisea, California.



Stop Archer campaign: sign me up

SHARE Catherine Bennett's concern about Jeffrey Archer ending up as a serious candidate for Mayor of London (Stop Archer, February 29), but not because of his financial past, his questionable financial dealings, or even the quality of his writing — none of which disqualified other Tory politicians in the past 18 years. It is his politics that worry me.

These were revealed several years ago in all their rabid glory on the floor of the Conservative Party conference, during the debate on law and order. Archer's contribution went unremarked in the future surrounding Michael Howard's list of 20-something steps to reduce crime.

In fact, both the sound and the fury behind Archer's call

for the fiercest possible punishments for young offenders made Howard sound like a part of the "liberal conspiracy" at the Home Office. Although it won cheers, in fact Archer's tone marked a sharp change from the support from the floor in previous Tory party conferences for more constructive approaches to youth crime.

It might seem tactically shrewd for Labour voters to hope Archer wins the Tory nomination to ensure a Labour victory. But the health of democracy depends on the quality of opposition as well as government. They need to be intelligent, thoughtful and credible. All Londoners — including Conservative voters — deserve better. Roger Graef, London.

MPs against fox-hunting

WHAT proportion of the marchers were interested in fox-hunting is unclear. (Letters, March 5). But the situation was not changed for the overwhelming majority of MPs. We think the sport is cruel to animals. The polls and our constituency post-bags show that most people agree. We have promised hundreds of constituents that we will do our best to stop it, and soon, probably next Friday, we expect to be voting for exactly that on Third Reading.

There are obviously countryside issues worth discussing, but cruelty to animals is not one of them.

If the massed ranks of Labour supporters who belong to the British Field Sports Society threaten to vote Conservative in retaliation, we will have to try to suffer the blow with fortitude. Nick Palmer MP, House of Commons.

Please include a full postal address. We may edit letters.

Of women, work and bad mannered children

IN case any of your readers (like Beatrix Campbell seriously (It's sexual Toryism, March 3), may I point out that I have never advocated that women should "withdraw" from the labour market.

Instead, I have said that public policy should assist women to choose whether to go out to work or look after their children at home, rather than direct them into one course or the other. And yes, it's important that men should both work and marry, since mothers — including working mothers — and their children need committed fathers for financial, practical and emotional support. Melanie Phillips, London.

BEA Campbell is a great upholder of the old communist tradition of never letting truth and accuracy get in the way of a good polemic.

She wrote that Demos's publication, the Parenting Deficit, was a reproach to mothers

who, by going out to work, "abandoned children to bad manners and crime".

Anyone who has read the report will know it is actually about how, over the last 200 years, both fathers and mothers have come to spend less and less time with their children. A rather different point and one that has nothing to do with what she calls "sexual Toryism". George Lawson, Communications officer, Demos, London.

Death wishes

WITH over £20 million to give away, it seems that Diana did not leave a penny to charity, instead leaving virtually all her estate to members of Britain's wealthiest family. Is this the caring princess? David Hedley, Hebden Bridge, Yorks.

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That's the spirit

David
McKie



ASKED TO NOMINATE a time when spiritual life in Britain was healthier than it is now, the vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton nominated the age of the Wesleys. "The country was safer and closer to spirituality then," he told Madeleine Bunting, whose account of Holy Trinity and the Alpha movement appeared in yesterday's Guardian. "When there is an increase in spirituality

there is a general improvement in the quality of life. When truth is valued, there is respect for individuals. Then there is morality."

Since John Wesley died in 1791 what he'd have made of this judgment can only be conjecture, but I guess he'd have been surprised. High 18th century England was famous less for its spirituality than its violence and brutality, its heroic drinking, its ripe and commonplace blasphemy, and the harshness of the lives, and deaths, of its poor. These were what struck overseas visitors, and to judge from his journals, often struck Wesley too. Though fearful about prosperity ("as riches increase," he warned "so will pride, anger and love of the world"), Wesley did not endorse the quality of life which economic events and the rules of society inflicted upon the poor. "I found some in their cells, others in their garrets, half starved with cold and hunger, added

to weakness and pain," he recorded in 1738. "But I found not one of them unemployed who was able to crawl about the room. So wickedly, so devilishly false, is that common objection, 'They are poor because they are idle'."

Outside the Methodist societies, and sometimes sadly even within, the Kingdom of Satan flourished. Wesley's own meetings drew crowds which might now seem unthinkable. 15,000 came, he recorded (perhaps not entirely accurately) to one on Kennington Common. But while many fell into rapture, confessed and professed, others were simply there for the spectacle. And still others came in the hope of silencing Wesley. Raving mobs, often mobilised by their betters, turned up at some of his meetings: at one, they tried to disrupt the proceedings by baiting a bull. Sometimes he was pelted with stones. It was one thing, too, to

bring people to Christ, quite another to hold them. Even Wesley's own congregation in Fetter Lane, London, did not avoid backsliding. "It is scarcely credible," he recorded in June 1739 "what advantage Satan has gained during my absence of only eight days." "As I expected, the sower of tares had not been idle during my five months' absence," he noted on returning to London in August 1762. He found some of the places he visited on his ceaseless journeys on horseback hopelessly mired in sin. "I went to Bath," he wrote in December 1841. "I had often reasoned with myself concerning this place, 'Bath God left himself without witness? Did he never raise up such a might be shining light, even in the midst of this sinful generation?' Huddersfield was a source of particular grief. 'A wilder people I never saw in England,' he noted after he rode through the town in

1757. "The men, women and children filled the street and appeared just ready to devour us." He was no better pleased when he went there to preach again nearly 20 years later. "I did not spare them," he wrote in his journal.

SOME towns in those days were notorious for their sinfulness. Wigan was "wicked Wigan", though returning there shortly before he died Wesley was glad to note some signs of improvement. Nowadays the geography of wickedness is harder to chart. "The devil enters into me as I come through Brentford," one 18th century aristocrat reflected, contrasting his virtuous life in town with his dissolute life in town; and today one rather assumes that a journey from Macclesfield to Merton, or Walspool to Wandswoth takes one nearer to sin rather than further away from it. And yet, in this

age of homogenising mass media in which everywhere is becoming like everywhere else, who knows? I remember visiting a moorland village in Yorkshire and remarking, in that condescending urban fashion which so outrages the countryside, on its peace and simple innocence. "I can tell you," snarled my host, "that within this little community you will find every form of wickedness known to mankind, not excluding bestiality". I remember too a report in the early sixties of a couple divorcing in Hertfordshire after 40 years of marriage. While they'd lived in one of the villages, the plaintiff testified, there had never been any trouble. Then they moved, and her husband's head was turned "by the bright lights of Hertford". When even modest Hertford is identified as an engine of sinfulness, what hope is there left for anywhere more exotic?

10 OBITUARIES

Liao Hongying

Seeking China's touchstone

A SMALL girl aged three sat on her father's knee learning to recite a simple Tang poem. There was still a Manchurian emperor on the throne, and a temple to Guan Di, the war God, at the end of the lane. The life of Liao Hongying, who had died aged 93, spanned three ages in China — imperial, republican and communist — and several in Britain where she was a Somervillian, a lecturer to Toynbee women's Guilds, a fine teacher of the Chinese language and an expounder of the Chinese revolution.

Her father, a poor but highly-respected Confucian scholar, and her brothers, recognised her talent from the start. "This precious sister, she's not going to marry anyone yet," Elder Brother insisted, "she must study first and become a scholar."

When Liao met Hongying she inquired, as always, about my sons: were they working hard at school and college? How fortunate for me if they

were! Hongying's seriousness was lightened by a twinkle of humour, but the family commitment to study prevailed throughout her life. In her eighties she still attended every meeting possible on China, taking notes in the front row from speakers who knew far less than she had ever forgotten.

Her story, beautifully told in a recent biography, *Liao Hongying — Fragments of a Life* (Larks Press, Dereham, NR20 5PT, £15.95) by James Hardan — a close friend from Somerville days — is very personal but also typical of many serious young Chinese, passionately committed to their country and to the need for change.

Other foreign teacher, Marjorie Rainey, helped her escape to England. At Oxford she resolved to study something useful for her country; she chose agricultural chemistry, joined the Quakers, and rejected boyfriends with the answer that China was her husband.

The chances of war and revolution sent the patriotic Chinese youth of Hongying's generation in many different directions. Some died young,

others stayed on after 1949 to face new upheavals under Mao, and yet others left the country and abandoned their commitment. Hongying stayed loyal and would have stayed in China, but marriage caught up with her. Working in wartime Sichuan for the Cambridge scientist — and sinologist

— so he resigned from the service. But it was Catch-22 time in the cold war. They sought to return to China, to be "useful". No, said the Chinese chargé d'affaires in London: that was impossible. Derek might be regarded as a spy.

Both now embarked on the task of explaining the New China from outside, lecturing and teaching. "Derek and Hongying" became an inseparable team in the British-Chinese Friendship Association and then — when the organisation was captured by pro-Moscow (and China-hating) communists — in the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding which they helped found.

Derek, who now survives Hongying, established the Chinese department at the Polytechnic of Central London's school of languages. She was a familiar figure in its corridors, lingering to give students important extra minutes, diminutive but determined.

Hongying was not alone in her optimistic view of China even during the Cultural Revolution. But she had a firmer

point of reference than most foreign sympathisers. In her youth, she wrote later, she watched "endless marches of students demanding food and an end to political oppression and internal uniform kicking emaciated rickshaw pullers... There was no end to the misery I saw".

China has changed hugely since then. In 1982, on one of her return visits, Hongying was already deploring the "social extravagance" of marriage in post-Mao society. And she noted sadly that very few women students wore their hair short.

But in this swirling change she was happy to find many people were still concerned with ethical questions: "What is the moral touchstone?" they asked. Hongying, a serious Chinese student, had asked that question all her life.

John Gittings

Liao Hongying, academic, born December 24, 1905; died February 21, 1998



Refugee from Chiang Kai-shek... Liao Hongying in England in 1951 with Marjorie Rainey, who helped her to escape

Todd Duncan

A Gershwin selection

TODD Duncan, who has died aged 93, only had to sing one aria at his audition before George Gershwin said, "Will you be my Porgy?" Duncan replied, "I don't know, I'll have to hear your music." He had thought of Gershwin, "as being Tin Pan Alley," as recalled, "I was just naive enough to do all the right things and not to know that I was doing them."

Duncan was born in Danville, Kentucky, and after graduating from Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana, he joined the voice faculty at Howard University in Washington DC. He made his stage debut in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* with the Aeolian Opera in New York in 1934.

When he auditioned for Porgy, all the other male singers had sung either spirituals or *Ol' Man River*, but Duncan brought with him an aria by Antonio Secchi, a little-known early 19th-century composer. Duncan hadn't brought his own pianist, which was unusual, instead he asked Gershwin: "Can't you play?" After a few bars the composer asked him if he could sing without the music and look towards him. After another eight bars, Gershwin offered him the part.

The following week a group of people associated with the

production gathered in Gershwin's studio, where he and his brother Ira played through and sang the whole score. "This is going to make you famous," Gershwin said when they reached *I Got Plenty O' Nothing*. By the time the Gershwins played the final *I'm on my Way*, Duncan was in tears. "These beautiful melodies in this new idiom — it was something I'd never heard... And to think he knew that was the song I would sing all over the world for nearly 40 years," he recalled in the 1980s.

The original production was directed by Rouben Mamoulian and Duncan said the first night in Boston was "brilliant". It was one of the great nights in American theatre history, although the Boston critics received Gershwin's opera somewhat coolly — as their New York counterparts did when it transferred in October 1935. Duncan sang his role again in a West Coast production just after Gershwin's death in 1937, and again on Broadway in 1942.

His personal success as Porgy brought him to London's Theatre Royal, where he appeared in a play called *The Sun never sets*, based on stories by Edgar Wallace, in which he sang a Cole Porter ballad, *River Gods*. Back on Broadway he was the Lord General in *Cabin in the Sky*, but lost the role to Kenneth



I'm on my way... Duncan and Anne Brown in the original production of Porgy and Bess

Spencer when *Cabin* was filmed. There were few film opportunities for black actors then, but Duncan did appear in *Syncope* (1942) and *Unchained* (1955). As a recitalist, with a repertoire ranging from Bach to Harold Arlen, Duncan claimed to have given more than 2,000 recitals in 66 countries. He made his New York recital debut at Town Hall in 1944, and the following year he was the first black singer ever to be engaged by the New York City Opera. During his time with the company he appeared in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Figliacci*, *Aida*, *Carmen* and *Rigoletto*.

While on a concert tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1949, he was offered the role of Stephen Kumalo in Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars*, adapted from Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. To the end of his life, he kept a picture of Paton in his house. "He came to two or three rehearsals," remembered Duncan in an interview in 1991, "I had great respect and love and admiration for him."

After his stage retirement Duncan taught at the Curtis Institute of Music. A man of immense gentleness and charm, he said in 1991: "Man's cruelty to man, it seems, has always been in the power

struggle. I think honey will do the job better than vinegar." In 1950 he won the New York Drama Critics' Award as well as a Tony for his role in *Lost in the Stars*. "You keep trying," he said, "that's the joy of being an artist, and that's the joy of being in the creative world. And some nights you touch the garment of God, and the other nights you're dealing with the Devil."

He had a son with his wife Gladys.

Patrick O'Connor

Todd Duncan, singer, born February 12, 1905; died February 27, 1998

Grandpa Jones

Moonshine at the Opry

THE comic "grandpappy" is a staple of American southern humour and Grandpa Jones, who died last week, was the last half-century's best-known exponent, first on Nashville's Grand Ole Opry stage and radio show, then to the millions of Americans who watched the television country comedy show *Hee Haw*.

"Hee, Grandpa," cast members would chorus. "What's for supper?" and Jones would reply with a library of white soul food, cornbread and country ham, butter beans and blueberry cobbler. Musically, too, he was content to play

spokesman for the bit-overall-wearing class, retelling with a battered fiddle and peering through little round spectacles.

Jones had been playing guitar, but during a spell on WVA in Wheeling, West Virginia, about 1938, he encountered the banjo-playing Cousin Emmy. "I thought that was the finest thing I ever heard," he said later, "and I kept after her and finally got her to show me how she did that."

At the end of the war Jones was broadcasting from Germany to the troops with his *Mountain Mountaineers*. Back in Cincinnati, Ohio, he appeared on the powerful station WLW while, like his fellow



Jones... banjo and humour

broadcasters Merle Travis and the Delmore Brothers, recording for the local King Records. In fact it was Jones and Travis who had launched King — an important label in the period leading up to rock 'n' roll — with an obscure 1943 disc credited to the Shepherd Brothers.

As well as scoring radio and jukebox hits with *Old Rascal*, *Mountain Dew* and *Eight More Miles to Louisville*, Jones joined the Delmores and Travis to record old-fashioned gospel quartet numbers as the Brown's Ferry Four. Years afterwards Jones would recreate this sober, elegant music with Buck Owens and Roy Clark in the *Hee Haw* Gospel Quartet.

In the 1950s, Jones left the Opry to work on rival country shows like the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* in Richmond, Virginia, but by the end of the decade he was back in Nashville. He often worked with his wife, the fiddle-playing Ramona Riggs Jones, whom he met in WLW days. Several of their children joined them on *Grandpa Jones Family Album* (1979), one of three amiable double albums the Joneses recorded in the 1970s.

Tony Russell

Louis Marshall Jones, musician, born October 20, 1913; died February 19, 1998

Donald McCormick

Spooks, bars and brothels

DURING the second world war Donald McCormick, who has died aged 86, met Ian Fleming, James Bond's creator, in the bar of the Barbizon Plaza Hotel in New York and a lifelong friendship began over vodka martinis. They were both then naval officers, but later McCormick joined Fleming at Kemsley Newspapers. The encounter also sparked McCormick's interest in intelligence, which meant that many of his more than 30 books were about espionage, and written as Richard Deacon.

McCormick was born at Rhyli and educated at Oswestry School. He was severely wounded in North Africa — where he devised a guide to the Casbah spies in Algiers — based partly on his familiarity with the native brothels — and went on to command a D-Day invasion landing craft. He was promoted to lieutenant commander and saw out the war in waters off the Indian subcontinent.

He then became managing editor of the Gibraltar Chronicle. At the height of his service for Lord Kemsley, Fleming ran



McCormick... 30 books

a group of nearly 90 foreign correspondents and he soon made McCormick the group's North Africa correspondent. McCormick's interest in the straits from Gibraltar to Tangier, then still an international zone complete with a cast of dubious characters. McCormick socialised at Dean's Bar, a drinking hole much patronised by the international community. Fleming then appointed McCormick the Sunday Times's Common-

wealth correspondent and in 1963 the paper's foreign manager. He held the position for the next 10 years, at the height of the cold war.

A series of histories of secret service agencies around the world — China, Japan, France, Israel and Britain — followed. McCormick also wrote biographies of "C", the late Sir Maurice Oldfield, who was for many years head of MI6, and of Lloyd George. Other titles included pot boilers, *The Identity of Jack the Ripper*, *Murder by Witchcraft* and *The Mystery of Lord Kitchener's Death*.

His last, affectionate book was *177: The Life of Ian Fleming*. The publisher lamented it as "the definitive biography," and its author came in for some criticism on this account. At the age of 80 he embarked on the writing of a *Congress's Guide to Erotic Literature*.

He is survived by his wife Eileen and a son.

Gary Puleston

George Donald King McCormick, writer, born December 11, 1911; died January 4, 1998

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The Guardian

A Country Diary

THE BURREN, IRELAND: I could be paddling or swimming in warm, tropical seas. However I was born some hundreds of millions of years too late. It is difficult to believe that the Burren, once by under warm oceanic waters as I stand gazing at deposits of that time, the Burren's limestone pavements, the stone of its walls. Five thousand years ago Neolithic man built Newgrange in the east of our island — 200 tonnes of stone transported over 80 kilometres. The single drystone walls of the Burren and the Aran Islands may be more recent but they, too, are beautiful. There are 1,500 kilometres of them on the

Aran Islands and there must be at least twice that in the Burren — snaking, as they do, up and over and down the hills, across the fields, towards the sea, on the water's edge, earth's fragile boundary. The walls are built on top of the rock from which time and weather split them. So no foundations are needed. Another advantage is that because of the gaps and holes in these walls, the sheep won't jump them! Then there is the relationship of the walls to the landscape from which they seem to grow. The skill is in the positioning of each stone in relation to the others and in the sturdiness of the whole.

Multi-shaped fissured stones are blocked together by long slabs, the roughness acting as traction to keep all in place. Sometimes there is a herringbone pattern and always there is the lichen, colour-enriching with its greens, whites, stinging vivid oranges fading to yellow (Xanthoria). A gap lined with this brilliant orange caught the light rays becoming gold, a miniature sun. Colour, light and shade play upon and within the Burren's drystone walls enhancing its landscape with fine openwork, with tracery of stone and so, as Emerson says, "The conscious stone to beauty given". SARAH POYNTE

CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

IN SOME editions yesterday, the Policy and Politics Page, Page 10, reported Peter Lilley, shadow chancellor, as saying that Dennis Skinner had built up a £350,000 pension fund since becoming an MP in 1970. The Commons fees office has since told Mr Skinner that Mr Lilley's figures are not correct. Were he to retire tomorrow after 28 years' service, the MP would be entitled to an annual pension of around £20,000.

IN AN ARTICLE by Tim de Lisle on Page 6, Media, March 2, headed, "Something had to go: me, an editing error led to a mistaken reference to the former editor of the Times, Charlie Wilson. A paragraph

beginning, "I said that if we had to have it [a competition], it should go on the listings page, where there was less credibility at stake than on the arts page proper. Wilson seemed to accept this." That should have said "Mike Hoy [managing editor] refused to accept this."

THERE was an erroneous reference to "Souza's Dambusters theme" in an article about the radio station, March FM, Page 5, March 2. Souza died in 1932. The Dam Busters, a film score of 1955, was among the marches written by Eric Coates.

IN A television review, Page 19, G2, March 2, we quoted, with reference to the ITV programme, Taggart, the Latin, *Terribilis est locus iste*. The final word should be *iste* (This is a terrible place).

DANIELA NARDINI played a barrister in the television series *This Life*, not a solicitor as stated in a report and caption on Page 3, March 2.

It is the policy of the Guardian to correct errors as soon as possible. Readers may contact the office of the Readers' Editor, Ian Mayes, by telephoning 0171 239 5589 between 11am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. Fax: 0171 239 5997. E-mail: reader@guardian.co.uk

Letter

John Yates writes: In the mid-1970s, I heard a broadcast of the version by Henry Livings (obituary February 23) of Hauptmann's *The Weavers* transposed to Lancashire during the Industrial Revolution, and wrote to him asking if it was in print, as I thought it would make a school play.

He wrote back enclosing a rather battered typescript, of "what seems to be the only copy" adding I could copy and use it. "I notice a much freer approach to drama among young people than I was encouraged to as 3rd West Maid in Stand Grammar School's sensational rendering of *Lady Franchot* (sic) *Stream*," he added.

Birthdays

David Astor, CH, former editor of the Observer, 86; The Rt Rev Thomas Butler, Bishop of Leicester, 58; Christine Davies, president, Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, 54; Jim Dowd, Labour MP, 47; Samantha Eggar, actress, 59; Prof Charles Fitzgerald, historian of the Far East, 96; Dave Green, jazz bassist, 56; Earl Grey, 58; Anthony Hedges, composer, 67; Most Rev Bruno Heim, former Apostolic Pro-Nuncio, 87; Robin Herbert, horticulturalist, 64; Richard Hickox, conductor, 50; Rodney Hogg, cricketer, 46; Sir Derek Mitchell, former civil servant, 76; Elaine Paige, singer, 46; Ronald Sandler, chief ex-

Death Notices

FATHERFULL, peacefully on 1st March 1998, Margaret of London, Oxfordshire, her many years with her family and many friends.

Births

CHANGHAW, On 3rd March 1998 to Liza and Peter a son, Frederick Louis, a brother to George and Hugh.

WTO place your announcement telephone 0171 715 4807 or 0171 715 4126 between 10am and 5pm Mon-Fri

Analysis Ulster peace talks



The Flying Dutchman
8

The final frenzied furlong before an accord

The timetable is ambitious: a settlement before Easter. But for all that an astonishing degree of optimism is in the air. By **John Mullin**

JUST as Martin Mansergh, special adviser on Northern Ireland to the Taoiseach, was seeking at a public meeting in west Belfast to placate republican outrage over the current path of the multi-party talks, news broke of the killings in Poyntzpass.

Mansergh was trying to defuse accusations that Dublin was selling out Sinn Féin. His appeal was a Blairite "Trust me."

Sinn Féin may yet do so: the party stands accused of using its six day exclusion from the talks to obtain concessions. It vowed there would be no return until a clear-the-air meeting with the P.M.

That would have been tricky. The Ulster Democratic Party just back from a period of suspension, threatened to walk out if Sinn Féin won its summit before its period of exclusion was over. David Trimble's Ulster Unionists made similar menacing noises.

Sinn Féin, squeezed by IRA hardliners and its failure to secure much so far now looks a little less surefooted. Tony Blair had played his hand well. He will meet Sinn Féin, but only after its suspension is over, so the ball is firmly back in Gerry Adams's court. Yet there remains an astonishing degree of optimism that a speedy deal can be done.

One of the reasons why Blair and Marjorie Mowlem want to speed the process along is that they recognise how vulnerable it is to terrorist extremism. George Mitchell, the talks chairman,

the governments, and many of the other parties involved, realise that the extremists will step up the violence as the end game approaches. But such atrocities as Poyntzpass, though aimed at destabilising the peace process, may yet have the opposite effect.

It was possible to detect something new in Trimble's tone in Poyntzpass yesterday as he and Seamus Mallon, of the nationalist SDLP, visited the bereaved families. He promised that the killings would concentrate his mind on a settlement.

At long last, they seemed like men who could do business. Under the so-called sufficiency of consensus rules, if they agree, the rest falls into place, even if Sinn Féin stays out, or comes back in and disagrees.

That, at least, is what the governments are betting. They would much rather Adams was there because they realise Sinn Féin out of the talks augurs badly for the IRA ceasefire, which was restored last July. But it explains why the governments are now moving at extraordinary speed. It is a race against time, and the window of opportunity is small.

The timetable is ambitious: settlement before Easter; separate though simultaneous referendums north and south on the package in May; and elections to the new Northern Ireland assembly in June. The aim is to have the new body meeting before the high point of the Orange marching season in July. It is likely that the final deal will be presented to the parties, like the Provi-

sional Heads of Agreement document in January, which kick-started negotiations, and the haggling will be done around that.

The governments believe most of the key ingredients are in place. Blair and Adams are seen as capable of securing a deal. Trimble has managed a skilful balancing act, between the young wing of his party, which is keen to negotiate, and the elderly rump of his parliamentary party muttering their opposition as Ian Paisley and Robert McCartney impudently denounce it all. And while no one outside the republican circle can know which way Sinn Féin will jump, the governments believe Adams and Martin McGuinness are people with whom business can be done.

AFTER a break between March 16-20 when the Northern Ireland leaders celebrated St Patrick's Day as Clinton's guests, the governments will present a joint paper before the end of the month. They are desperate that the settlement is not seen as imposed but as the result of consultation. The three day a week meetings at Castle Buildings will be extended, and the operation may move to a new

venue, possibly in Wales. Easter is the deadline for agreement. If that is reached, both Westminster and the Dail will have to pass legislation for the simultaneous referendums. The target dates are May 7, 14 or 21.

Some Labour circles suggest that Trimble would easily be able to sell a deal to his party as long as Dublin agrees to rescind its constitutional claim to the six counties. One insider says the question has been amounted to: "Do you want Trimble to be the First Minister of Northern Ireland, and do you want the Republic to give up its claim to the North?"

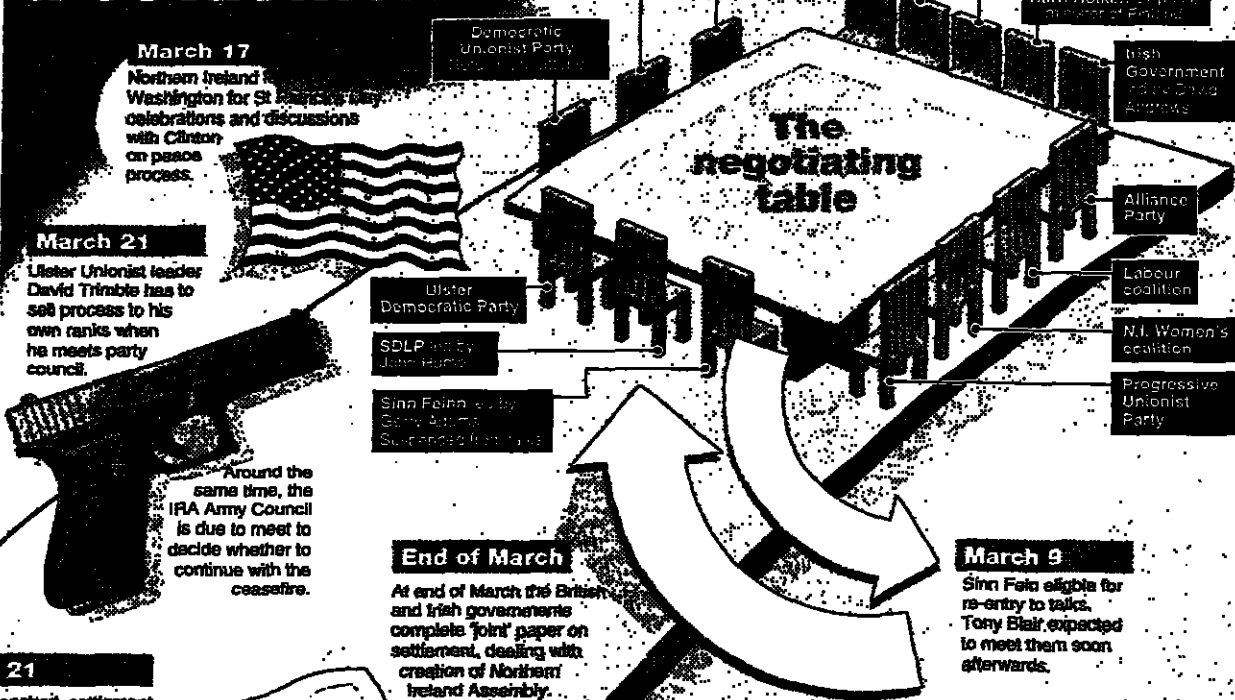
Mr Adams is unlikely to sign up to any deal. He will not win wording strong enough on the crucial issue of north-south relationships to convince him of the dynamic nature of the institutions. But he could win concessions on police reform, demilitarisation, and prisoner releases.

Sinn Féin would still be likely to campaign against the proposals, joining a strange alliance with Paisley's DUP and McCartney's UK Unionists. But it would stand for the assembly. Its strategy is to overtake the ailing SDLP which it seems likely to do in the next election but one.

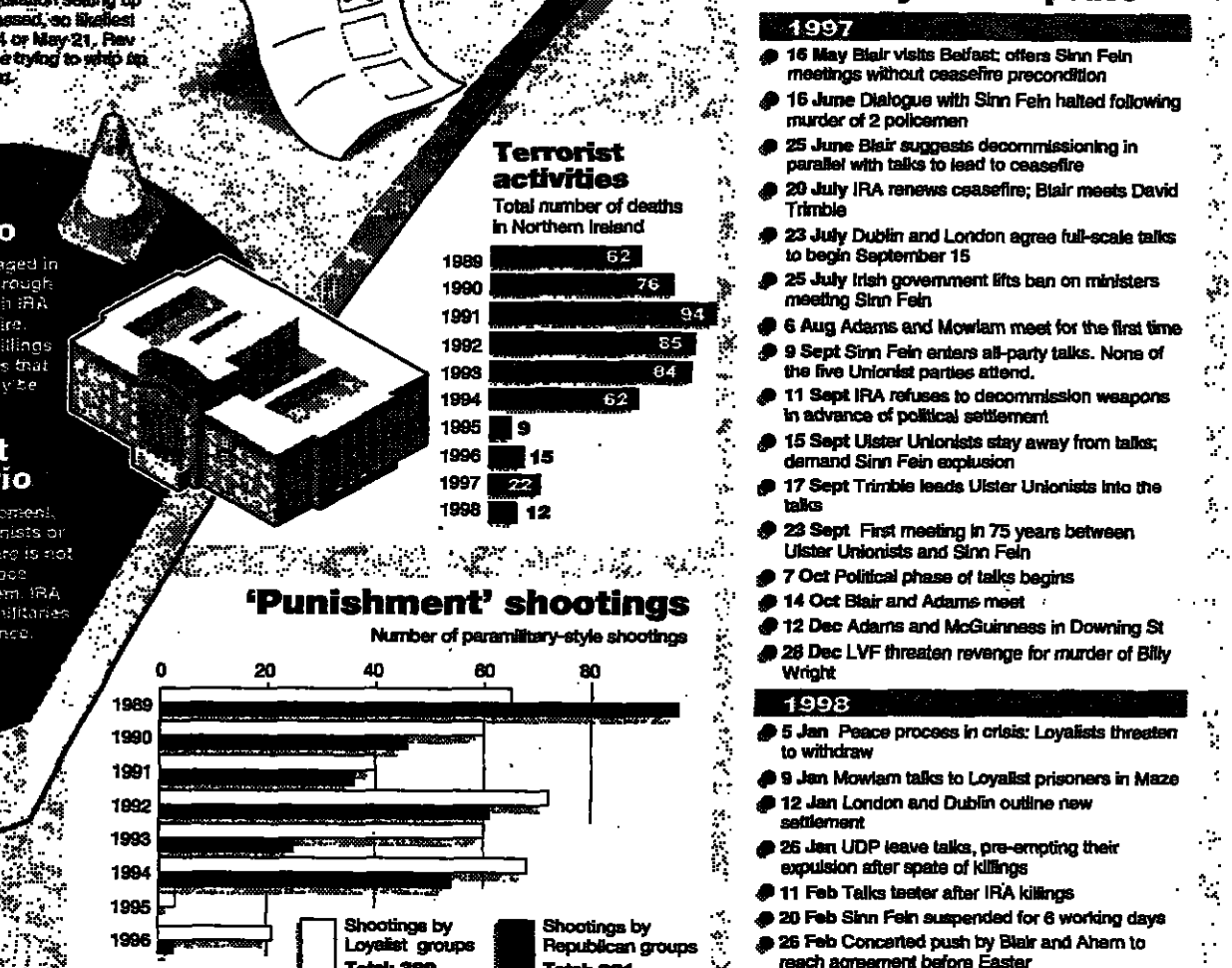
Some features of the settlement are agreed but, according to Martin Mansergh, at least 12 major stumbling blocks remain.

Strand One, dealing with internal arrangements, will bring an assembly elected on a single transferable vote system in the 18 constituencies, each returning either five or

Last steps to a settlement



The rocky road to peace



is the most serious sticking point, but the governments have proved adept before at coming up with wording that contrives to be all-things-to-most-parties.

The final crucial question is if the Unionists and SDLP cannot agree, will the governments ignore the triple lock approach and put a deal direct to the people?

Graphic sources: RUC; Graphics: Steve Villiers; Fintona; Sheehy; Research: Mark Espiner; Guardian RAI.

John Mullin is the Guardian's Ireland correspondent; Ewan MacAskill is Chief Political Correspondent.

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Finance Guardian



A traveller checks his watch before the 1400 London Paddington to Swansea Great Western train set off yesterday — dead on time

PHOTOGRAPH: FRANK BARON

Tough controls on rail sale

Keith Harper and David Hencke

MINISTERS last night confirmed that they are poised to impose tough conditions on the possible takeover of a privatised rail company, Great Western Holdings, which would make millions out of former British Rail staff.

Ministerial sources said that the Government is furious that the bus and train company, FirstGroup, is in an "advanced stage" of discussions with GWH about a takeover. If the deal is approved, seven GWH directors could share more than £10 million.

Ministers were also furious at revelations that the Government lost up to £1.1 billion in the rushed sale of British Rail's three rolling stock companies. The acquisition was slower and later than under public ownership. The company was changing timetables to give them up to seven minutes extra to get to destinations.

"Yet in the crazy world of privatisation, the management will be rewarded with a publicly subsidised, multi-million pound pay-off."

Mr Bray said that FirstGroup, which already had a 24.5 per cent stake in the com-

pany, were partly responsible for the mess GWH was in. GWH directors and staff own 51 per cent of GWH's shares, while 49 per cent is split equally between 31, the investment group, and FirstGroup. GWH was originally a management buy-out in which the 1,900 staff bought shares worth £1.5 million. The company was valued at between £115 million and £160 million by analysts last summer, but has rapidly increased in value because of a 13 per cent rise in passengers.

Seven directors' shares were priced at around £9 million by accountants, Ernst and Young, last summer. Brian Scott, GWH's chief executive, had 100,000 shares, worth £2.2 million, while Great Western Trains managing director, Richard George, boasted a holding of 90,000 shares, worth £1.76 million.

The NAO report points out that ministers had difficulty getting the highest prices for the three leasing companies because they were sold in advance of the operating companies and had "little or no relevant track record."

The Anglo leasing company was sold to GRS Holding Company for £996.3 million; Everholt to Eversholt Holdings Ltd for £518.3 million; and Porterbrook to Porterbrook Leasing for £528 million.

Railtrack slip-up over wrong kind of poo

RAILTRACK'S latest slip-up was yesterday revealed to be pigeon droppings under railway bridges. The droppings have become such a problem that the London borough of Wandsworth is taking legal action against the company, writes Keith Harper.

The council said it was asking the High Court to order Railtrack to take immediate action to remove the mess from a bridge in Balham High Road, south London. Scores of pigeons nest and roost in the bridge and their droppings create a hazard for passers-by.

Railtrack has refused to put up protective wire netting at a cost of £12,000. The council has been clearing the mess up five days a week, but the problem is so bad that it is now also being cleared at weekends.

Maurice Hester, Wand-

sworth's finance chairman, said: "We are taking action because of the safety failure of Railtrack to shoulder its responsibility. It is totally unacceptable that people should have to endure this dangerous eyesore and the associated health risks."



One of the offending Balham birds PHOTOGRAPH: FRANK BARON

A Railtrack spokesperson confirmed it was embroiled in a wider dispute over the mess. "They are classed as vermin but the Highways Agency is responsible for keeping the pavements clean. Nobody is yet prepared to accept who should foot the bill."

Having admired Mrs Beckett's pragmatism, however, it is hard to avoid the depressing feeling that corporate excess over pay, perks and pay-offs will not be eradicated by the carrot of consent. Calls for a stick will return.

Business strangulated by medical backwardness

LARRY ELLIOTT diagnoses a £500m-a-year national malady

BITISH business is used to being strangled by sterling; it has grown accustomed to being battered by base rates. Now, it seems, it is being hobbled by hernias, writes Larry Elliott.

At the start of what has been named Hernia Awareness Month, a report shows that the economy is being ruptured to the tune of almost £500 million a year because doctors are using old-fashioned procedures for one of the world's most common performed operations.

Businesses have long been concerned about the effect of heavy drinking on their workers but the research shows that they should be equally concerned about heavy lifting. On average the 73,000 people who are trussed up every year spend six weeks off work when they should be back in their offices or factories in a fortnight at most.

According to the report compiled by David Winter, a senior lecturer in econometrics at Bristol University, the cost to the nation of a hernia to a full-time worker is £5,290 — before medical bills, the company doctor's time and any post-operative complications.

That many workers are unable to fulfil their normal duties during the four-and-a-half months average waiting time for an operation adds £960 per patient to the bill.

Mr Winter said: "The cost of a hernia episode in terms of an employee taking time off and having their job downgraded is £4,540 for part-time, or

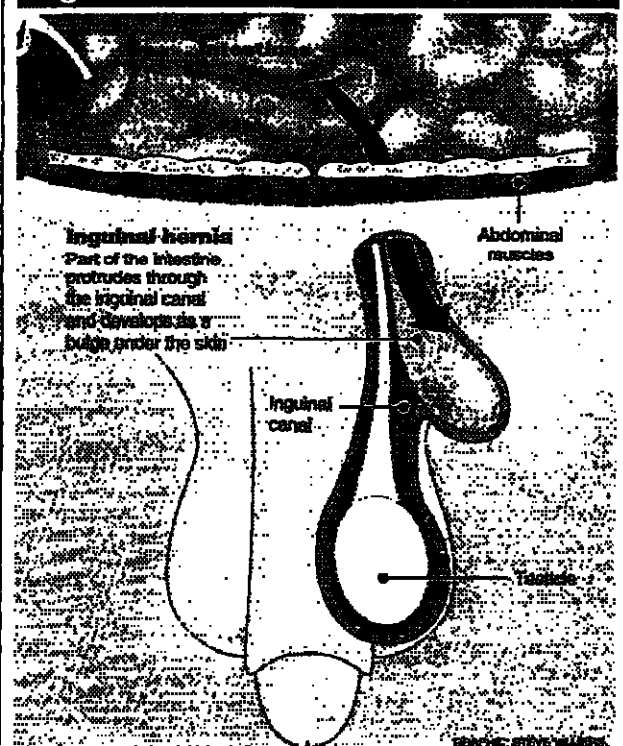
£6,240 for full-time workers (plus the cost of the operation). "On average six weeks is spent off work recovering from the operation. In 22 per cent of cases more than two months is taken off work."

Medical experts say that because of bad advice and ignorance, the British are ignoring twice as many hernias as any other Western country. Ninety per cent of operations are carried out under general anaesthetic, which is unnecessary.

Dudley Rogg, clinic director of the British Hernia Centre, said: "The survey exposes the huge effects that outdated methods of hernia surgery are having — not only in economic terms."

"Hernia surgery should have the patient back to normal duties in days — certainly under two weeks, even for manual labour. This survey has uncovered the astonishing fact that one worker in 25 is off normal duties for more than one year."

Inguinal hernia



Vickers denies Rolls sale is one-horse race

Mark Milner

VICKERS yesterday denied the sale of luxury car maker Rolls-Royce was effectively turning into a one-horse race, with Germany's BMW the only name in the frame. "We have sufficient credible parties to make this an interesting and very competitive sale process," Vickers said.

Since Vickers put the business up for sale a number of groups have been linked with the sale including BMW, Volkswagen, Daimler-Benz, at least one Far Eastern car maker, Harrod's owner Mohamed Al Fayed and a consortium of Rolls-Royce owners.

Industry speculation has pointed towards an eventual German buyer. BMW has said it will bid, but Daimler-Benz

ruled itself out on Monday. According to reports from the Rolls-Royce unveiled its new Seraph model this week — VW executives said yesterday their company was still considering whether to bid.

BMW has been widely seen as in a strong bargaining position because it supplies engines to Rolls-Royce and could cut off the supply to a rival. However, Vickers said it had reassured other prospective buyers that under the terms of the three-year-old agreement, BMW cannot halt supplies immediately.

The two companies were at odds yesterday with BMW complaining the sale process was taking too long and Vickers arguing that it was proceeding in line with the original schedule which will see a deal in principle signed

by the late spring and completed by summer.

Vickers revealed that operating profits last year had fallen from £33.3 million to £75.8 million. After exceptional items of £57.1 million and a £21.6 million tax charge, it made a loss of £2.2 million.

Nor was the City cheered to hear chairman and chief executive Sir Colin Chandler say that despite a strong financial position "possibilities for overall growth in 1998 will be constrained" as the group adapted to its new structure.

With the sale of the medical businesses and disposal of Rolls-Royce, the structure will consist of Vickers Defence Systems — including the Challenger tank factories in Leeds and Newcastle — marine propulsion and turbine components and Cosworth engines.

Steelmakers offer car with less metal

AN INTERNATIONAL steel consortium yesterday unveiled in Geneva a new car body that it claims is far lighter and safer than a conventional one and can reduce fuel consumption and noxious emissions, writes David Cow.

The "ultra-light steel auto body" or Ulsab, developed by 35 steelmakers from 18 countries, including British Steel and Porsche Engineering, weighs 25 per cent less than normal car bodies. It is also 80 per cent more rigid and is the result of a four-year project costing £13 million.

Its makers claim that the lightweight body will

reduce fuel consumption by at least 3 per cent.

With global output of cars already some 50 million, experts reckon that demand will swiftly push worldwide sales to 60 million.

Manufacturers such as Jaguar, Saab and Alfa Romeo already use parts of Ulsab technology, including what are known as "single laser-welded tailored blanks" — pressing out a unit such as the outer shell of the car body or door panel from a single sheet of high strength steel.

The Ulsab project leaders claimed that their new lightweight body would enable manufacturers using

this technology to reduce assembly and production costs by cutting the number of parts used. It would cost less as it used less steel.

Mercedes-Benz yesterday claimed to be the first carmaker to provide an electronic stabiliser as a standard part on all its cars by the year 2000. The stabiliser, first fitted to Mercedes' super-luxury S-class saloons, is now standard on the new small car, the A-class, after it failed the moose test, flipping over when swerving to avoid an animal. It senses that moment and automatically applies the brakes to individual wheels.

Notebook

Beckett keeps to a diet of carrots



Mark Milner

MARGARET Beckett, the Trade and Industry Secretary, will have cheered some and disappointed others with her approach to corporate reform yesterday.

First the easy bit. Mrs Beckett promised a thoroughgoing review of company law on the sensible grounds that parts of the regime are outdated and that company law is an area where the Government can and should take a lead. Few, surely, can quarrel with that.

On two of the most contentious issues in the lexicon of corporate governance — shareholder voting and top pay — Mrs Beckett is, depending on your point of view, keeping the legislative powder dry or ducking the issue.

Certainly the idea of a secretary of state forcing institutional investors to do their duty by forcing them to vote the shares they own appeals. Even more seductive is the idea of boardroom greed being kept in check by, for example, the mass ranks of the Inland Revenue humming the old Beatles line "should five per cent appear too small, be thankful I don't take it all, 'cause I'm the taxman".

Mrs Beckett prefers persuasion to dictat. That is fair enough. There is no tradition in Britain of voters being compelled to their democratic duty. Folicing it would be a pain and who should be responsible for voting the shares underlying the increasing number of tracker funds?

Caning fat cats would be tough, too. Can MPs or civil servants design an adequate set of performance indicators against which to measure remuneration? Unlikely. But surely, if corporate Britain sets its own house in order, though voting out the members of obviously over-generous remuneration committees would help.

Having admired Mrs Beckett's pragmatism, however, it is hard to avoid the depressing feeling that corporate excess over pay, perks and pay-offs will not be eradicated by the carrot of consent. Calls for a stick will return.

turing and farming industries will have few doubts that the Bank needs to cut interest rates.

It is not the cost of borrowing that is giving them a hammering but the strength of the pound which they believe is being underpinned by short term interest rate differentials between Britain and Continental Europe.

On the other hand, the performance of the service sector would seem to point in an entirely opposite direction. The latest Purchasing Managers figures will not make comfortable reading for the MPC.

The snag is that the economy is becoming harder to read, both in the short and medium term. At the short end it is at least arguable that the strength of the pound owes more to the fact that the UK won't be signing up for the first wave of monetary union than to a quarter point either way on interest rates.

Further out there is the question as to whether the Bank is having to set interest rates for one economy or two — whether any interest rate policy can now respond to the pressures and needs of both the manufacturing and service sectors. Hardly the background against which to rush into anything tomorrow.

Vickers' vagaries

WITH Vickers at the corporate crossroads, events yesterday were hardly such as to encourage an upbeat mood. There were sharp exchanges with BMW, the most likely buyer of Rolls-Royce, which Vickers put up for sale in the autumn. On the other hand Vickers said it was not talking to GKN about buying the latter's armoured vehicles business.

Such carryings-on are, no doubt, part and parcel of serious deals in the making. Rolls-Royce is not a fire sale, and will produce a tidy pile of cash. Talks with GKN can always be resumed.

They may have to be. The new-look Vickers is concentrated on two main businesses, propulsion and defence — though Cosworth engineering is by no means negligible, especially if Vickers can spread its franchise beyond racing.

As Vickers acknowledges, the current year will be tricky. It is optimistic about the growth of the propulsion business — up to 15 per cent a year in some areas. Defence is more difficult. The Challenger II battle tank is beginning to pay its way and the company is looking for more orders from Europe, South Africa and the Middle East. Other projects beckon.

But despite vociferous protestations Vickers may lose out in the battle for the multiple-role armoured vehicle to the multi-billion pound which includes GKN. It is not simply a matter of production or profits. Both are still well down the road. The key is the bearing the contract will have on rationalisation of this sector of the European defence industry.

Vickers may yet find that it needs to get closer to GKN's valuation of its armoured vehicle business than it has so far been prepared to accept.

Bank on caution

THERE is a perceptible air of impatience around the City over the monetary policy committee's interest rate deliberations.

Analysts, having to second guess the Bank, then predict whether its decision is right or wrong and advise traders and clients accordingly, can be forgiven if they look askance at the MPC's more academic approach.

The Bank, however, is right to be cautious before taking a view on the economy. Large swaths of Britain's manufac-

Mexico set for EU trade deal

Stephen Bates in Brussels

THE European Union yesterday overcame doubts over Mexico's human rights record to offer it the prospect of the most extensive free trade agreement reached with any country in the developing world bar Turkey.

Proposals, accepted by the European Commission, to launch negotiations with Mexico later this year on trade liberalisation came at the same time as commission-ers agreed plans for a new transatlantic marketplace which would involve dismantling remaining tariff barriers with the United States.

The imperative is all the greater because of the American agreement, brokered by

Sir Leon Brittan, the trade commissioner, which is intended to create a free market in services, the ending of all tariff barriers by 2010 and liberalisation of regulations concerning government procurement and investment.

Mexico's negotiations will be more limited, with exclusions from tariff reductions on sensitive products such as textiles, fruit and vegetables. But these form only 10 per cent of current trade.

Rosario Green Mestas, the Mexican foreign minister, said: "Agreement will be important because it will allow our economy to diversify."

"It will... create new jobs and export industries, but it will also help Europe in gaining access to Latin America and the Pacific."

TOURIST RATES — BANK SELLS

Australia 2,278	Germany 2,917	Malaysia 5,31	Singapore 2,84
Austria 2,448	Greece 402.82	Mexico 0,6361	South Africa 7,91
Belgium 59,57	Hong Kong 12,41	Netherlands 3,2708	Sweden 12,92
Canada 2,289	India 65,24	New Zealand 2,74	Switzerland 2,38
Japan 0,85	Ireland 1,1723	Norway 2,8805	Turkey 367,730
Denmark 1,116	Israel 5,30	Saudi Arabia 6,08	USA 1,5140
Finland 8,92	Italy 2,366		
France 9,749			

Supplied by NatWest (excluding rupee, shekel and mdatari)

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And 10 minutes from time, Quinn produced the perfect cross for Phillips to complete a highly satisfactory night for the visitors.

Caution was very much their key word in the initial stages and they survived Forest's opening flurry with reasonable comfort — even though Lionel Perez did well to deal with a 25-yard free-kick from Pierre Van Veenendaal.

But have having tested the water, Sunderland set about making an impact in the Forest half with mounting success.

And in the 31st minute the writing was not only on the wall Forest were guilty of focusing their attentions on Quinn.

Arrived in the box and that left Rae to get in a header that Beasant got a hand to but could not keep out.

After that Beasant was more successful, flinging himself to save a Johnston shot and then making an even better save from his own defender, Colin Cooper as Forest reeled under Sunderland pressure.

Sunderland scorers (4-4-2): Beasant; Lyons, Carr, Chettle, Rogers; D. Johnson, A. J. Carr, C. Hamill, B. Williams; Van Veenendaal, Campbell (4-4-2); Perez, Holloway, Crackock, Willmott.

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1990

Ireland will have to try and try again in a new French killing field as another slaughter in Paris looms large



Frank Keating

WHY does all rugby wining the world over, cower when it considers Ireland's match in Paris on Saturday? Why such a fuss this

time? Why pre-emptive calls for the ending of the Five Nations Championship itself? For what's new under the watery suns of winter? It has been thus for just about half a century.

Sure, this time the French have already run in 75 points in their first two matches. But the fact that there is a new stadium for the slaughter surely gives some glimmer of hope to the good guys in green. Well, a change of killing-field must be heartening, for in the old stadium at Parc des Princes, in 12 matches between 1974 and 1996, Ireland scored only two tries, and one of them by an "unknown"

warrior. It was a penalty-try donated by English referee Ed Morrison in Ireland's final match there (lost 10-45) in 1996. So things can hardly get any worse in the new, swish Stade de France, can they?

Ah, the optimism of Celtic fringers. Did you hear of that conversation when Ireland's captain Keith Wood shook the hand of Scotland's Gary Armstrong in the tunnel at Lansdowne Road before they tossed for ends last month. "Best o' luck, Gary," said Keith. "What do you most want for Scottish rugby this season?" Replied Gary. "To win this match at least. What do you want for Ireland?"

Said Keith. "That Ireland win the Triple Crown, the Grand Slam and get a squad to win the World Cup." Said Armstrong. "Hey, steady on, Keith, be serious." Retorted Wood. "Well, you started it."

So always look on the bright side of life and, to be sure, the way I look at it is that after their travails in the Parc things can only get better for Ireland in Paris. Apart from that consoling largesse from Morrison (it just had to be English bounty, didn't it?) the only Irish score in 22 years of trying was that gem way back in 1990 by Leinster's wing Freddie McLennan.

Walking the pitch before the match, Freddie unwrapped a toffee and the paper flew away to land just over the try-line and a yard or two from the posts. "You see, boys, that's where I'll score this afternoon," he announced to Dave Irwin and Ollie Campbell. Bets were laid and, sure enough, Freddie flies down the wing and over the line, and with Aguirre and Gourdon on him at the corner-flag, he still cuts in crazily and aims at right angles for the posts, just making his marker as a dozen covering *altes* cats in blue land on him.

In the 10 previous matches at Paris's old Stade Colombes they had scored only three tries (Tony O'Reilly, Tom Brophy and Pat Casey) before, gloriously, prop Ray McLoughlin and scrum-half Johnny Moloney scored one apiece in Ireland's last show there in 1972. "Ray flopped like a walrus on a here-nor-there loose ball and, after a maul, I feinted to pass, didn't let go, and squeaked over," remembers Moloney. Famous tries.

Mind you, like great vintage, has Irish rugby ever travelled well? The team first flew to a Paris match in 1952 and won 11-8 at such a breeze that it inspired the IRD that summer to pioneer a transatlantic crossing by air for a "missionary" tour to Argentina. They had no sooner touched down in Buenos Aires than Eva Peron died. All big rugby off. Instead, might the tourists like to travel inland to Cordoba and introduce rugby to the police cadets' college, which only played soccer? Sure, said the Irish. After 10 days, the full Irish XV played the Police College XV. Ireland lost.

For the travelling *crack* is all, as it will be in Paris this weekend when all is said and done. It is the half-century anniversary of Ireland's 1946 Grand Slam, which they began by beating France by 13-6 at Colombes. Limerick's centre Paddy Reid scored the decisive try and in John Scally's classic history, *Giants of Irish Rugby*, Paddy recalls, "Paris for us at that time was like going to the edge of the world. We were green as grass. After the win we were invited to the Irish Embassy. Champagne was the order of the day. We were knocking it back as if it was stout."

Cricket

Wasim arrives with a shrug

Paul Weaver in Port Elizabeth

WASIM AKRAM flew in here yesterday afternoon, airily dismissing the reservations of his team-mates and the resignation of the chairman of selectors Salim Altaf. The Pakistan manager Asad Aziz was not there to meet him; he was visiting an elephant park.

No surprise there. The manager, silent, smiling and ineffectual, has been sighted only rarely during this troubled tour.

In Johannesburg, allegations that Mohammad Akram and Saqlain Mushtaq had been visiting a nightclub on the evening they claimed they had been mugged were freshened up when John Katz, a former boxer and bouncer, said he had witnessed the players being assaulted by another bouncer after an argument with a woman.

Really, it was just another ordinary day on an ordinary tour by Pakistan. And from here they go to Zimbabwe, which is on the edge of a national strike.

The tour captain Rashid Latif was also missing at the airport, although the vice-captain Aamir Sohail was there. The Pakistanis are thought to be not uniformly happy to see Wasim. He has a strong personality and was a hard captain.

None of this seemed to worry Wasim, who was a national hero at the end of last year when he led the side to a 3-0 victory over West Indies. Then, after a tournament in Sharjah, he was left out of the South Africa-Zimbabwe tour party amid allegations of match-fixing and betting.

Yesterday, after a day-long flight from England, Wasim said: "It is nothing to do with the players. If the players are not happy they can come to me and we can settle our differences privately."

Concerning Altaf, who has quit because the chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board Khalid Mahmood went over his head in calling up the former captain, Wasim said: "No one cares if he has resigned. It doesn't matter to me."

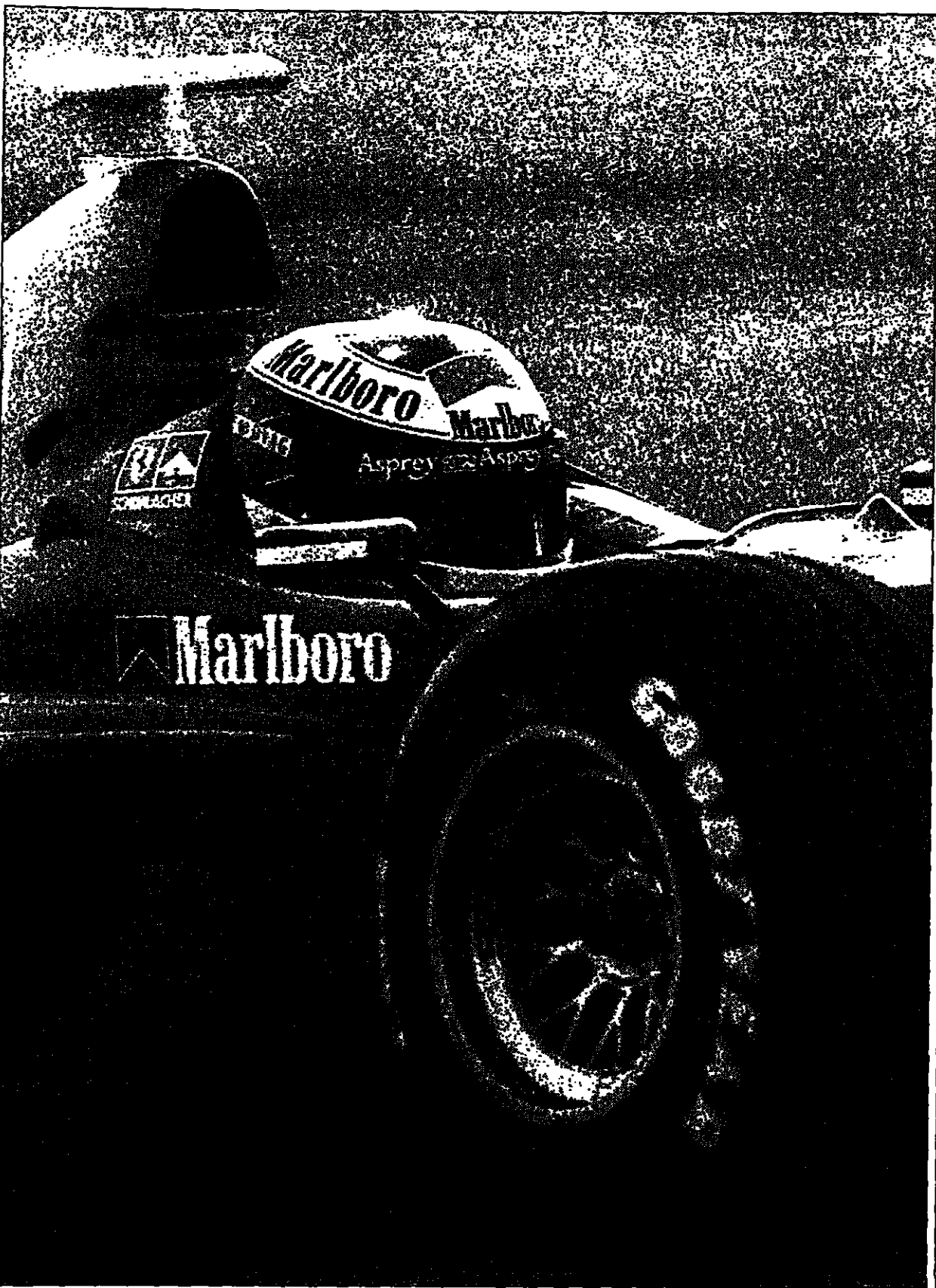
Yesterday there were reports that the other two selectors, Zaheer Abbas and Shafiq Ahmad, were also about to resign after Wasim's arrival.

About the allegations of match-fixing, Wasim said: "I've been playing for a long time and have earned a lot of money, so why should I do such a thing?" Looking weary but fit, he added: "My last first-class match was a month ago. But I've been working indoors with Lancashire and feel hungry for cricket." After this winter, captaining troubled Lancashire will feel like a sinecure.



Wasim... 'hungry' to play

Countdown to Melbourne



Goodyear, bad year? . . . Michael Schumacher tests his new car and tyres, now grooved, at Mugello PHOTOGRAPH: CAMMY BUNGU

Prancing horse riding for a fall

Alan Henry reports that Ferrari will have nowhere to hide if their new car does not give Michael Schumacher, right, the world drivers' title this season



FERRARI's assertion that nothing less than winning the world championship will do this season could hang like an albatross round the neck of their sporting director Jean Todt when the grand prix action begins in Melbourne this weekend.

Todt has set his sights high since the Ferrari F40 was unveiled before Christmas but his words are an acknowledgment that his future with the team will be on the line if Michael Schumacher is not given the equipment to get the job done.

Ferrari came closer to winning the world title last year than even their president Luca di Montezemolo expected, even if the collision between Schumacher and Jacques Villeneuve in the final race ended the season on an unsatisfactory note. Yet there are many within the Formula One community who believe the famous Italian team missed a crucial opportunity and that Ferrari's prospects of a world title in the foreseeable future ended in the gravel trap at Jerez along with Schumacher's car.

"We've seen very little of Ferrari (testing) at similar tracks to other people," said Williams's technical director Patrick Head. "It's probably a good decision, because there's always a lot of pressure on Ferrari but this year they seem deliberately to have put pressure on themselves by saying there are no excuses."

"I suspect they may be scrabbling for an excuse when they get to Melbourne but I don't know how they will go over a full season. I'm not certain they are quite as confident as they were when they announced their new car."

Ferrari have done most of their development work either at the twisting little Fiorano test track adjacent to their headquarters at Maranello or at the Ferrari-owned Mugello circuit near Florence. Few other teams use

Mugello so there has been no accurate measure of the new car's progress.

The chief designer Rory Byrne and technical director Ross Brawn have impressive technical credentials, having crafted the Benetton with which Schumacher won the championship in 1994 and 1995, and their F40 is lighter, lower and more aerodynamically efficient than its predecessor, which was designed by John Barnard before he left last April and became technical director at Arrows.

Byrne and Brawn had difficulty last season fitting their design philosophy round a car conceived by another engineer, but it gave them a ready-made excuse if the Ferrari failed to match its rivals from Williams and McLaren. This year they started with a clean sheet of paper and have much to recommend them.

Schumacher seems coolly confident but the Ferrari team radiate none of the thinly suppressed high-tension excitement one can detect at McLaren, nor the understated confidence of Williams. And Ferrari remain contracted to run on Goodyear tyres at a time when the Bridgestones used by McLaren, Benetton, Arrows, Stewart, Prost and Minardi have been demonstrating a performance edge.

"The only reason I could see for things not going well is if we have big reliability problems, are really unlucky, or because of the tyre situation which is very difficult to predict," said Schumacher. "If you have a situation when one tyre make is a second a lap faster than the other, what can you do?"

Tobacco team can offer Schumacher a packet

MICHAEL Schumacher for the new British American Tobacco team if Ferrari prove uncompetitive this season, the BAT managing director Craig Pollock said yesterday.

Pollock, who ceased being Jacques Villeneuve's manager when he helped buy out Tyrrell to form the new team, which will start racing next season, is still keen to recruit Villeneuve but believes the world champion may stay with Williams.

"I think his aim is to beat Fangio's record [of five championships]," said Pollock. "To say that we could win the world championship in the first season might be pretentious."

The tobacco company will provide about £200

million over five years. "We are a well-funded team," said Pollock. "If we can go for Jacques we can go for Schumacher."

Schumacher, who commands about £20 million a year, is tied to Ferrari to the end of the 1998 season but is understood to have a clause in his contract which would allow him to go early if the car was uncompetitive.

Rugby Union

Clubs handed '10 in Europe' carrot

Robert Armstrong

TWICKENHAM has given enthusiastic backing to a plan to include up to 10 English clubs in the European Cup.

In a remarkable U-turn, the Rugby Football Union policy-maker Fran Cotton has shelved his proposal that English district sides should take part in the Premiership clubs' blueprint for entering teams comprising only England-qualified players in European competition. But Bath

Cotton said: "I hope this proves to the clubs that we are working for them even in their absence. I hope they will sign up to a lengthy commitment to the European Cup and dispel the myth that the RFU is anti-club in Europe."

Cotton's charm offensive will raise eyebrows among the clubs who withdrew from Europe two months ago and recently rebuffed his invitation to Twickenham to discuss his blueprint for entering teams comprising only England-qualified players in European competition. But Bath

welcomed the developments. "We have stood shoulder to shoulder with the other Premiership clubs on this matter," said Tom Sheppard, their director. "But this sign of possible progress is good."

It remains to be seen whether the clubs will be persuaded to reconsider their decision to increase Premiership One from 12 to 14 clubs next season and ignore any competition organised by ERC.

Gatland selects New Zealander to face an unchanged France

WARREN GATLAND, Ireland's new coach, has turned to a fellow New Zealander to fill a vacant berth in his back row for Saturday's daunting Five Nations trip to Paris, writes Ian Mallin.

Andy Ward, a 27-year-old from Whangarei, is the one new cap for the game against France. The open-side flanker becomes the first player from the Ulster-based Third Division club Ballynahinch to play for Ireland.

Ward, who came to Ireland four years ago, is a full-time rugby development officer with the Irish Rugby Football Union. He is picked ahead of London Irish's Kieron Dawson.

Gatland said: "Andy will bring some stability and strength to the back row. But Kieron is a quality player, and this does not mean that his international career is over, by any means."

France retain the team that beat Scotland 51-16. Christophe Lamaison, replaced during that game, has recovered from a head injury.

Sport in brief

Snooker

Stephen Hendry's manager, Ian Doyle, has accused the chairman of the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association Rex Williams of breaking an agreement at yesterday's event in Bristol, which voted to extend voting rights in the game's governing body from the top 40 to the top 64 players, writes Clive Everton.

Last Friday a truce between the camps provided for Hendry and four other players not to pursue their own resolution to remove Williams and two boardroom colleagues, Jim Meadowcroft and Bob Close, while the WPBSA board would withdraw its motion to extend voting rights which would weaken the power base of Doyle, who manages 13 leading players as well as Hendry.

Because of the alleged agreement Doyle's camp was not represented at the event. Williams claims he was unable to secure the agreement of all board members to the truce terms and so the resolution went ahead. "We did not submit proxies because we were assured there would be no vote," said Doyle. "Williams gave a clear undertaking on behalf of his board."

Rowing

Cambridge have chosen the 26-year-old Alistair Potts to steer the Boat Race on March 28, relegating the Olympic women's cox Suzie Ellis to the reserve boat Goldie for the second year running, writes Christopher Dodd. Potts coxed

Rugby League

Terry Matterson and Peter Gill will be available for the London Broncos' first Challenge Cup quarter-final against Hull KR at The Stoop on March 15 after the game's operational board took the unusual step of warning them about their future conduct, but not suspending them. Following incidents in the stormy fifth-round tie against Halifax last weekend.

Chess

Alexei Shirov dropped back to joint leader at the Linares super-grandmaster tournament after a surprise defeat by the tallentier Vassily Ivanchuk, writes Leonard Barden. Garry Kasparov, who drew on Tuesday, has now dropped to fourth place but has a game in hand.

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